

vol.
10

My
Friend's
Little
Sister

Has It
IN
for
Me!

Author:
mikawaghost

Illustration:
tomari





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My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Me!

Characters



Kohinata Iroha

First year. A polite honor student who has it in for Akiteru alone. A talented actress. The type to pick karaoke songs based on the vibe she gets from those around her.



Kohinata Ozuma

Second year. Nicknamed Ozu. Akiteru's only friend, and the engineer of the 05th Floor Alliance. Likes electronic sounds, so listens to EDM once in a while.



Otoi [redacted]

Second year. Her given name is private. The 05th Floor Alliance's trusty sound engineer. Doesn't look like it, but loves death metal and has an impressive death growl.



Tomosaka Sasara

First year. Iroha's former rival, the two are now friends. Social media influencer. Subscribing to various services to keep track of trending music is like second nature to her.



Ooboshi Akiteru

Second year. The protagonist and the 05th Floor Alliance's producer. Values efficiency above all else. Likes to listen to background music when he works to increase his focus.



Tsukinomori Mashiro

Second year. Akiteru's cousin, ex-fake girlfriend, and author Makigai Namako. Doesn't like to sing in front of people but is good at it, so loves to go to karaoke alone.



Kageishi Sumire

Math teacher and the talented artist Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. A total nuisance and good-for-nothing woman who gets drunk and then forces anyone who gets too close to sing anime songs with her.



Kageishi Midori

Second year. Though her acting skills suck, she's head of the drama club. A phenomenal honor student who gets full marks in every subject. Good at music, but the sight of a recorder sends her mind places.



Kiraboshi Kanaria

Makigai Namako's editor, who brings her idol talents to the job. Chirps at the end of her sentences. Has a stock of 108 songs that she uses for her idol activities.

Recap

Relationships are unnecessary. Friends are unnecessary; well, more than one, anyway. And girlfriends are *definitely* unnecessary. The way most people spend their youth is horribly inefficient, and it used to be my policy to shed everything unnecessary in order to get ahead in life.

My name is Ooboshi Akiteru, and I was the scumbag of the class trip, somehow trying to juggle two dates simultaneously—one with my former fake girlfriend, Mashiro, and one with my friend's little sister, Iroha.

I'm not sure I'm really qualified to keep reusing this intro anymore, but at least it's impactful.

"I get why you might not believe me, but it's the truth. I'm Makigai Namako, dumbass."

"I get why you might not believe me, but it's the truth. I'm Makigai Namako, dumbass."

Mashiro and I were riding the ferris wheel, locked away from the outside world. I heard the words from her mouth being repeated almost simultaneously through my phone's speaker.

Yep. Makigai Namako-sensei, who I had thought of as a friendly college-student-slash-author who'd been helping us for so long, was actually Tsukinomori Mashiro: the girl I'd known since I was small, and who I fake-dated for a while.

I was completely floored, even as Mashiro started to outline the details for me. And though Mashiro was now being a hundred percent genuine, there was still something I had been hiding from her. It was the 05th Floor Alliance's greatest and most closely guarded secret: that our Phantom Voice Troupe was Kohinata Iroha by herself.

Mashiro had plucked up enormous courage and placed incredible trust in me. I wanted to return the favor by recounting a tale I had left buried for years.

The story I'm about to tell you is one of beginnings. It starts with a clean slate, before the 05th Floor Alliance was formed.

It tells of a time when my friend's little sister—Kohinata Iroha—had it in for nobody at all.

Prologue

It all started when I was still in my second year of junior high.

It was early July. The cicadas were chirping their lungs out, and the sun burned against the asphalt, creating a thick, rising heat. This time of year was hellish: just walking outside made you break into an intense sweat, but finding refuge in a building put you face-to-face with air conditioning set cold enough to make you sick.

In a word, it was annoying.

I knew I sounded like a weirdo, groaning like the zombies in the video game I played yesterday, but that was the only way I felt able to make it up the long, steep road in front of me. It was the afternoon, just after school; why was it still so damn hot? Didn't the Japanese weather realize it was supposed to cool down right about now? I knew grumbling wouldn't change a thing, but I tried it anyway.

Looking around me, I could see students around my age chatting avidly with their friends. This heat should have been enough to have them all whining about it together, but instead they ignored their surroundings and focused on their conversations. I couldn't have been more jealous.

As for me, I was more or less a loner. If you wanna make something of it, go ahead.

I kept my sulking on the inside as I continued to amble up the hill, and after an arduous trek, I finally made it back to my apartment building. I stepped into the lobby and was hit with a blast of coolness from the air conditioning.

"Huh?"

Just then, I noticed somebody crouched down in a corner of the room. Someone with hair that had been allowed to grow out. They obviously didn't care much about how they presented themselves; it was clear they had simply thrown their uniform on in the morning and left it at that. Their face was mostly hidden, so a stranger would probably be instantly put off by the way they were squatting there.

But I broke into a relieved smile—because this was my friend.

"What're you doing over here, Ozu?"

"Hm? Oh, hey, Aki." The familiar eyes between the strands of his hair only became visible once he looked up.

When I really got to know him about a year ago, he'd been branded a weirdo and was a total outcast in the classroom. His only

safe haven had been a science room, until some delinquents reported his unauthorized use of it out of spite, and then that teacher sold him out. It knocked him for six, and I got curious.

“Can’t you just continue the experiment at home?”

“We don’t really have the...” He’d stopped and thought for a moment. *“If I made something at home, would you come and see it, Aki?”*

“If it means you’ll keep doing those experiments, I’ll come over as many times as you want. You’re really smart. It’d be a shame to stop just ‘cause you don’t have anywhere to work anymore.”

“Yeah... I guess I’ll do that, then...even if I have to ignore the obstacle.”

That last part was so quiet I might have imagined it, but I didn’t fully understand it in any case.

Anyway, since then, Ozu and I had only gotten closer. I wanted to see what the genius at work would look like, once he’d gained some confidence.

Which led us to today.

“Did the shape of the tiles in this apartment remind you of trigonometric functions?” I teased.

“Are you kidding? I know I’m weird, but I’m not *that* weird,” Ozu responded, his tone even. “I was using the size of the tiles in the lobby to calculate the cost and number of tiles used in the entire building. Really, it’s just a fun little mental math problem I’m entertaining myself with. It’s the perfect thing to stave off boredom.”

“I’m sorry for making a random reference to trigonometric functions. It doesn’t really work as a joke against you, coming from an average brain like mine.” I admitted defeat, and decided I wouldn’t tease him at all in the future, since his response would just demonstrate my IQ deficit compared to him. “How come you’re doing mental math down here, then?”

“The locks to the apartments aren’t electronic.”

“Sorry, but mind starting from the beginning?”

It wasn’t unusual to lose whole chunks of the conversation when talking with Ozu. He was like a computer quickly giving the user their desired result without showing them every last calculation the CPU handled to get there.

It seemed he hadn’t realized, but he was willing to slow down for my sake, and now he twiddled his fingers as he picked his words carefully. “If the locks were electronic, I could hack them to open the doors.”

“Your tone says ‘water is wet,’ but your words say ‘I’m about to commit a crime.’ But yeah, I guess you’re not wrong.”

“In this building, the doors require a physical key to unlock.”

“Well, yeah.”

“That’s why I’m out here doing math with tiles.”

“Stop! You’ve done it again! You’ve left out some really important info!” I immediately jumped in, sighing when Ozu just stared at me blankly. “How come you couldn’t get into your apartment? Tell me what the exact reason is, and be clear about it.”

“Oh, right. Well, it looks like I left my key inside when I went out this morning.”

“Okay, I got it! So you’re hanging around out here ’cause you’re locked out. Mystery solved!” I rewarded him with an exaggerated round of applause.

All he needed to do was admit he had forgotten his key, and I would’ve understood everything right away. But this was Ozu—Kohinata Ozuma—and he always took the long way round when it came to this sort of thing.

“Good thing we live right next to each other, then,” I said.

Ozu blinked at me. “Why?”

“Cause you can wait at my place till your parents get home. C’mom.” I flashed him my key and jabbed my thumb in the direction of the elevator.

I had moved into Apartment 502, on the fifth floor of this building, right before entering junior high school. My parents ran a company that dealt with stage costumes, makeup, and styling, which meant they could afford a pretty big apartment with everything we needed.

For certain reasons, though, I’d been living alone since last month. Well, I guess I don’t really need to hide it, actually: their company was expanding into the American market, and so my parents had gone abroad.

My mom had always made a lot of business trips abroad to do the styling for her cousin, an actress named Mizuki-san. This time, though, they were gone on a permanent basis to set up a company base in the United States. They had wanted to take me with them of course, but I was adamant that I wanted to stay in Japan. I didn’t want to leave my new friend, Ozu.

There probably aren’t that many people out there who’d pick a friend over living with their family in America, especially when their family relationships are functional.

By now, though, I was at the height of curiosity when it came to Ozu’s genius and the range of valuable things he might create, to the extent that I didn’t care about anything else. When I told my parents I wanted to stay behind, I felt like an underground mahjong lord with a mind swarming with endorphins, tyrosine, and enkephalin. In the end, they recognized my enthusiasm and granted my request.

They continued to lease Apartment 502, gave me a credit card and

money that I could do whatever I wanted with to live off, and left me lacking for absolutely nothing. Honestly, I felt like they were doting on me too much. Not that I wasn't grateful.

Truth was, I was an outrageously selfish guy. My parents offered, quite reasonably, to move me into a smaller, cheaper apartment that was perfect for living on my own, but I shut them down and threw a tantrum about staying in Apartment 502. No, I do not want to remember it. It was cringey as hell.

But you can't blame me, can you?

Apartment 503, the Kohinata's apartment—where Ozu lived—was right next door. It was so perfect, there had to be some sort of divine intervention going on, and I wasn't about to give that up.

So anyway, I invited Ozu to come wait at my place, but he didn't budge.

"That's okay. My family'll be back soon anyway."

"Oh, yeah? What, your mom?"

"No, she's too busy right now. She doesn't come home much."

"O-Oh. Well, I won't ask too many questions." As I caught a glimpse of some dark family drama, I took a verbal step back.

It wasn't guaranteed that busy parents would lead to you being unhappy. My family was in a whole other country, and we still got along fine. Still, it didn't hurt to be careful and considerate, even when there was only a small risk of upsetting someone. It was simply the safer choice.

"So who's this 'family' that's coming then?" I asked.

"Uh, well—"

The automatic doors opened behind us, letting in the sounds of the road beyond. I turned around, and—

It was like something in the air had changed.

And it wasn't just the wind coming in through the doors. It was more like the change accompanying the appearance of a celebrity. You know what I mean, right?

The air seemed to take on the color of lemon, and though I should have been too far away to smell anything, I could swear I was picking up a sweet, sour scent that made my chest jolt.

She had bright golden hair down to her shoulders, and almond-shaped eyes like a cat. A red ribbon stood out against the white fabric of her sailor uniform. She held her school bag in front of her in both hands, giving off the impression that she was an uptight honor student.

Then there was her face. It looked a lot like Ozu's. The girl approached us as soon as she entered the lobby.

"What are you doing, Ozuma?"

"Hi, Iroha. Good thing you're early. I forgot my key." Ozu's smile

was slightly off as he looked at her, like it was plastered on.

She paused. "Oh." The golden-haired girl then glanced at me. "Who's this?"

"Aki, he's in my class. Lives next to us. My friend."

"Your friend, huh?" The girl looked away, uninterested—before her head shot up and her eyes opened wide. "Wait, your *friend*!?" She had the look of someone seeing a natural monument, or perhaps a ghost, for the first time. Was she really *that* surprised her brother had a friend?

Since friends were a rarity for her brother, I didn't want her to think I was a weirdo, so I did my best to seem genuine and gave her a smile. That ought to aid in our communication. "My name is Ooboshi Akiteru. It's nice to meet you."

"Oh, um—I'm his sister, Kohinata Iroha. Thanks for...being his friend." Her voice trailed off at the end, making it hard to hear, but she seemed to know what I was going for.

Kohinata Iroha. It was strange that this was my first time seeing her when we lived in the same apartment building. Though I guess when you walk past a stranger—even if they're your neighbor—you often don't take any notice of them.

That was the start to our whirlwind of a relationship.

It was a completely ordinary meeting. There was nothing destined or meet-cutey about it. She was just a stranger who happened to be my friend's little sister, and happened to have lived close by this whole time.

It was ironic how un-annoying the whole thing was, considering how annoying her major influence on my life would end up being.

"And that's how Iroha and I first met."

"It feels so weird, hearing you talk on and on about how you met Iroha... Is listening to it all gonna turn me into an NTR fetishist?"

"What're you muttering about, Mashiro?"

"Nothing. Continue."

"Okay. Otoi-san shows up in the next bit."

"*Another* girl? But I can't say I'm not curious about Otoi-san's past..."

"Yeah, Otoi-san was...really something."

"I'm getting kinda worried now. I dunno if I'll be able to hear this through to the end without pushing you off the ferris wheel."

Chapter 1: My Friend's Little Sister Might Be a Delinquent!

"Y'know, I had no clue you had a little sister till she showed up yesterday."

"Cause I never told you."

The next day, Ozu and I were sitting at our classroom desks (which are right at the back on the hallway side of the room) and having a hushed conversation. I get that it seems a little paranoid to whisper when no one would be paying attention to us anyway, but Ozu and I were pretty much at rock bottom when it came to the social pecking order. We automatically kept our voices low to avoid giving any of the popular kids a reason to pick on us.

It was just last month that that group of kids made it so that Ozu couldn't use the science room anymore, and those kids were still in the classroom. I went off at them before, which led to my getting beaten up. I wanted to fight back, but knew that getting in trouble would probably cause issues for my parents when they were about to go chase their dreams abroad. The kids didn't do any damage to my face—they didn't want to get in trouble either—and so I was able to send my parents off without them noticing. That much I was grateful for.

Because of that, I avoided eye contact with those kids. They really threw their weight around the classroom, and our classmates knew I'd fought with them, so they were careful about interacting with me too. In short, most of the other kids tried not to look at me most of the time anyway.

Ozu and I basically had to blend in with the rest of the furniture at school. I'm not sure which human rights that left us with, but there you go.

I was taking out my textbook to prepare for first period, when the door right behind us slid open with an intrusive clatter.

Perfume. Or wait, is that shampoo?

I immediately reacted to the soft, uniquely feminine scent. That's what being a pathetic teenage boy does to you.

But when I saw the face of the person striding past me a second later, I blinked. There was a lollipop stick in her mouth, and she had long red hair inelegantly shoved back in an Alice band. She wore the same short-sleeved blouse and short skirt as the other girls, but the

windbreaker hanging off her shoulders was markedly different. It was summer—what was the jacket about? It looked to me like this girl couldn't decide if she was too hot or too cold.

But there was an even bigger question at hand.

Who was she? I couldn't remember seeing a girl like her in our class before.

The classroom buzzed with a sudden stir.

"It's Otoi-san..."

"Otoi? You're kidding. I heard she got kicked out."

"That's not what happened. I think she just got suspended. But yeah, I forgot she was in our class."

"This is her first time showing up this year, huh?"

"The leader of Krimzon... I've never seen her before, but she looks kinda scary!"

Snippets of rumors floated into the air like bubbles, before popping out of existence.

It looked like at least my classmates knew who she was. It was only Ozu and me who were confused. Everyone else was staring at the red-haired girl with either fear or curiosity in their eyes.

Now that she was here, I remembered that there was a seat in our class no one had sat in since the start of our second year. I just got so used to it being empty, I never got around to memorizing the name of that missing student.

The girl—who the others were calling Otoi—walked straight to the front of the room where those delinquents who gave Ozu and me a hard time were.

Oh, right. She's one of them. Makes sense.

If she got suspended—or expelled, or whatever—then obviously she was going to be a delinquent.

"O-Otoi... Long time no see."

"Sup."

Their expressions stiffened as they greeted her, as though they were frightened.

Otoi's expression didn't even twitch as she pointed at one of the seats they were sitting in. "That's my seat."

"Oh, right, sorry! It's just been empty for so long, so..."

"Sure. I'm not gonna bite yer head off, so chill."

"Ha... Ha ha ha! You're so kind, Otoi!"

The hell was going on?

These guys acted like they owned this classroom and everything in it, but now they were bending to Otoi's will like a bunch of shoe-licking grunts.

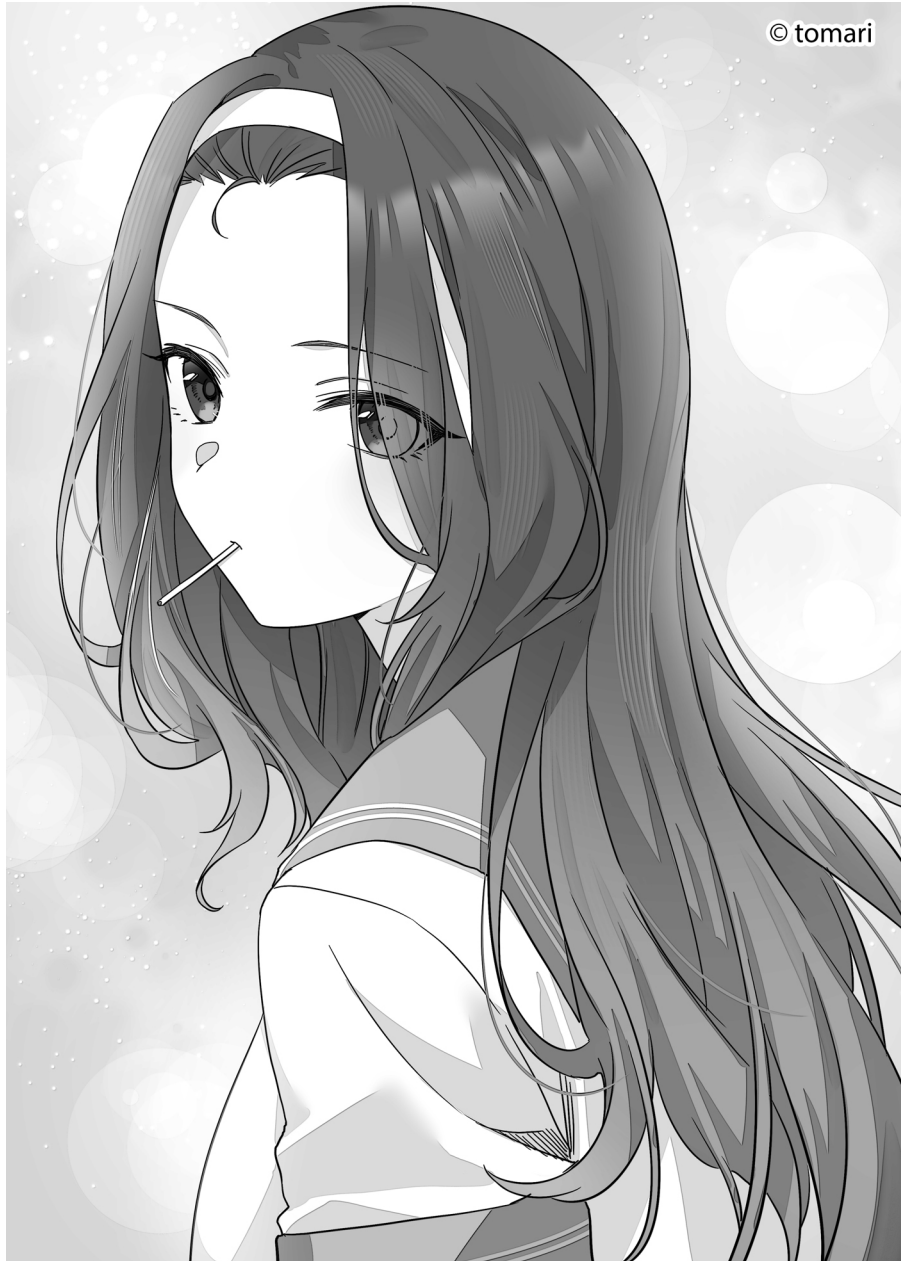
Otoi slumped down into the vacated seat. She then turned to say something to the retreating kids with an awkward look on her face.

“Can I ask y’guys somethin’?”

“Eep! S-Sure thing!”

“I heard there were these guys who started a fight, beat up one of our classmates, ’n’ even got a teacher involved. D’you guys know who?”

“Wh-What are you gonna do to them?”



"I dunno. Just thought they had guts. Reckon I'd like to meet kids as plucky as them."

"You mean it?!" The fear on the kid's face was quickly replaced by an expectant smile. All of the delinquents leaned forward together. "It was us! We're the ones you want!"

"Thought it might've been. Welp, I'm impressed. There ain't many on my team who'd take things as far as you guys."

"Really?! D'you mean you'll let us join Krimzon?! That's sick!"

"Would y'mind tellin' me what exactly went down?"

"It was this lameoid kid—I dunno, a mathlete or something—who was actin' all big-headed just 'cause some teacher was giving him the special treatment. We totally shut him down, though!"

"It was Kohinata, and his friend, Ooboshi! That's exactly what happened, right, Ooboshi?!"

My fists twitched instinctively when I heard my name. I was...scared, but more than that, I was mad. I wasn't confident I'd be able to hold back if they tried it with me a second time.

"C'mon, quit ignoring us!" One of the kids took a step in my direction, a wicked grin on his face.

Why couldn't they just stop? I was literally just minding my own business. I didn't want any more trouble.

Just as I thought that—

"Whoargh?!"

He fell face-first onto the floor. I'd never seen anybody face-plant that gloriously other than in manga. He pushed over some of the surrounding chairs and desks as he fell, making textbooks rain down and slam into the back of his head.

All that was left after that was the paralyzed boy on the floor, his ears turning red with embarrassment, and the silent stares of our classmates, who were too shocked to laugh at the absurd scene.

Only one person in the entire room still had it all together.

"Ugh... What a pain. These kids really go crazy when I'm not around, huh?"

"Wh-What the hell did you do?!"

Pulling her leg back from where she had tripped the boy, Otoi listlessly got to her feet. She ignored the cries of his friend, instead grabbing him by the hair on the back of his head. She yanked his head up, revealing that his nose was dribbling blood, and whispered into his ear.

"We don't need brainless dolts like you in Krimzon."

"Urgh..."

"Bullyin' 'n' violence are crimes, y'know. What're y'gonna do if things get stricter round here and the police start payin' attention

'cause of what you did?"

"W-We're so...rry..."

"The trouble you guys're causin' is makin' stuff difficult for us. Y'get me?"

"Y-Yeth..."

"Kay, 'slong as y'understand. Know your place from now on, 'kay?" Otoi let go of his head, then turned to his friends. "Smatter? You guys still look like you've got a problem. We can fight if y'wanna, but I can't be bothered lettin' it drag, so come at me all at once."

"Ngh..."

She was up against boys—and more than just one or two—but Otoi didn't seem fazed in the least. In fact, she was actively egging them on.

They were biting their lips with embarrassment, their gazes sharpened like they were dying to land a hit on her. And yet, not one of the delinquents moved from where they were standing.

As Otoi made her way back to her seat, she shot them a single glare.

"Move."

With that, she slumped back into her seat, and planted her face on the desk to take a nap. The boys looked frustrated, but they withdrew dejectedly all the same. It seemed they didn't want to fight back against Otoi, even when she left herself defenseless.

"They could've hit her right then, couldn't they? Why didn't they do anything?" Ozu asked, keeping his voice low so that only I could hear him.

With Ozu's binary way of thinking, I could see why he was confused. If they could win, they would hit her. If they couldn't, they wouldn't.

But this situation was a little more nuanced.

"You wouldn't punch a lion even if it were fast asleep, right? That's why."

"Her constitution is way different from a lion's, so I don't think she could fight like one. That's not a very good comparison."

"It wasn't meant to be taken so literally."

That's what I meant by a binary way of thinking...

Anyway, this Otoi girl had this incredibly threatening aura about her. I didn't know what this "Krimzon" thing was, but it sounded like a fishy gang of delinquents. And if Otoi was its leader, she couldn't be good news.

I decided I wouldn't get involved with her.

Sometimes it was best just to let sleeping dogs—or lions—lie. That way, they wouldn't punch you.

It only took till lunchtime for my plan to fail.

“Ooboshi. Kohinata. I wanna see you two behind the gymnasium.”

“Certainly.”

Her request was sudden, unreasonable, and random, but Ozu and I were so weak that we had no choice but to comply.

She took us to the most secluded of corners on the school grounds, which was cast in low light even during the day. It was overgrown with drooping weeds, and just the kind of place an underhanded organization clad in black would show up to strike illegal deals.

I could hear nothing except the far-off sounds of people shouting and a basketball bouncing off the floor, which was either the basketball club playing inside the gymnasium, or some kids fooling around. How nice for them. I bet even in their wildest dreams, they’d never suspect there were two pathetic boys on the other side of the wall about to be beat up by a terrifying gang leader, all while they were busy having fun.

“Sorry ’bout this. Want one?” Otoi sat down on the stone steps leading from the gym’s back entrance and offered us a lollipop from her pocket.

“What is it?” I asked.

“A Suckie. I love ’em.”

“I thought snacks were against the school rules.”

Otoi laughed. “You’re a hoot. Y’know I’ve been skippin’ school this whole time? Y’really think I care ’bout that?”

“I’m not telling you not to eat them. Everyone’s free to do what they want.”

I was just stating a fact.

“Can I have one?” Ozu asked.

“Sure, here.”

I elbowed him in the ribs. “Didn’t you hear what I said about the rules?”

“I’m not big on the rules either, otherwise I wouldn’t have been using that science room for my experiments.”

“That’s different. It helped to hone your talent, so that was fine.”

“Huh? I don’t get your logic sometimes, Aki.”

“Because it’s not logic. It’s selfishness.”

We argued over this a lot, and it took a moment before I snapped back to my senses. We were ignoring the most threatening delinquent in our school. Terrified she might beat us up for being rude, I chanced a glance at her expression.

“Aw yeah, you guys really are hilarious. Makes the Suckie go down quicker.”

“That doesn’t make sense... Only saliva can dissolve it, right?”

Otoi laughed again. “Y’got a wit on you too.”

I couldn’t tell if she meant it or if she was just brushing me off. Ozu didn’t give much reaction when I made similar quips either, so maybe they were pointless. If they’d argued back or something, we could have a bit of banter, which would actually be fun.

That aside, Otoi seemed to like us—which was good. It meant there was way less chance of her suddenly snapping and beating us to a pulp.

Right? Well, I sure hoped so.

It was probably about time I found out what she wanted with us.

“So, uh... Why did you wanna talk to us?”

“Oh, yeah. I got a question for you guys.”

“For us?”

“Yup. Y’know Kohinata Iroha in the year below, yeah? I’m guessin’ she’s your sister?” She looked at Ozu.

“Huh?”

I hadn’t expected *that* name to come out of her mouth.

“Yeah, she’s my sister. Unless you’re thinking of someone with the exact same name.”

“Right. ‘N’ what kinda girl is she?”

“What kinda girl? Um...” Ozu peeled off the plastic of his lollipop and put it in his mouth as he thought.

I was immediately taken aback. With Ozu, everything was black-and-white. That meant he could answer any question at once. He would come out with the truth like *that*, without making any processing noises in between.

Yet here he was, clearly having trouble with his response. It didn’t look like he was trying to select the most accurate reply from several possibilities either. It was more like he was a regular student encountering a difficult problem on a test—one he didn’t know how to even begin to answer.

“What kinda girl is Iroha? Er... What kinda girl...”

“C’mon, it’s not that tough a question. She’s your sister, right?” Otoi prompted.

“Y-Yeah, you’re right. Um... She’s, uh...” He was starting to get genuinely anxious.

“Otoi.” Unable to watch any longer, I decided to intervene. “Why d’you wanna know about Ozu’s sister?”

“Huh?”

“This is coming outta nowhere for us, so we’re struggling to answer your question.”

“Oh, right.” Her eyes blinking lazily, Otoi began to explain. “One of the younger Krimzon kids came to me for advice.”

“Younger? Your youngest member has gotta be thirteen at most.”

“Age is about the way y’feel. That’s what I meant by younger.”

“I...see.” Were all delinquent gangs this lackadaisical?

“So this member’s been gettin’ along with Kohinata Iroha lately. ‘N’ I wanted to know ‘bout her, ‘cause apparently she’s interested in us.”

“She’s interested in your...gang?” The question was out of my mouth before I could stop it.

I’d only met Ozu’s sister for the first time in our apartment building’s lobby the other day. I really didn’t have a good grasp on her personality. But I *did* have my first impression of her, which was that she was a well-behaved, shy girl. She didn’t look like the type of rebel to start causing trouble as part of a gang.

“She’s a Goody Two-shoes after all, then?” Otoi prompted.

“Sounds like you know that much already,” I said.

“I guess. I looked into the first-years, y’see. All I could get on her was that she was a regular honor student.”

“Yup, that sounds about right. Not that I’ve ever spoken to her properly.”

“I thought her brother might know if there was a side to her she didn’t show at school. Looks like it was too much to ask.”

She was right. Ozu’s face was such a perfect picture of confusion that you could take a picture and use it as an emoji. I didn’t get what the problem was either. We were talking about someone he lived with here.

“Krimzon, right? I didn’t realize a gang of rebels would do a full-on background check into people wanting to join.”

“I dunno if they all do it. We don’t go diggin’ too far ourselves either.”

“Are you guys worried about attracting spies from other groups? Y’know, that sounds kinda hype.”

“Nah, ‘snothin’ like that. It’s more checkin’ to see how likely it is they’d get permission from their parents.”

“Parental permission? You need permission to rebel?!”

I knew literally nothing about delinquent culture. If she told me that was how it worked, I’d have no choice but to believe her—no matter how weirdly wholesome it sounded.

“I’m not ‘bout to take responsibility for other people’s lives. Can’t be assed with the drama. We only accept people who aren’t gonna fight with their parents over joinin’.”

“That actually makes a ton of sense...”

“Izzit that weird?”

“I thought you guys’d be nothing more than a bunch of outlaws.” I sighed with relief. My shoulders relaxed, and I even started feeling a

strange sense of affinity with Otoi. When she called us behind the gym, I was sure we were doomed—but she actually seemed pretty nice. With this new perspective, my tone as I spoke to her naturally softened.

“Yeah, by the way,” Otoi began, sounding just as casual as if we were still making small talk. “We don’t like people lookin’ down on us like that. We all do a bit of physical trainin’, so we can stop that kinda stuff before it starts.”

“Please accept my most sincere apologies.”

I take it back—she *was* scary.

“Nyway, I got the info I wanted on Kohinata Iroha. Thanks for that.” Otoi stood up and gave us a wave before turning her back to us.

“Ah! Wait a sec!” I called.

“Smatter?”

“Are you gonna let Ozu’s sister into your team, then?”

“Mm... I’m still thinkin’ about it. ’N’ honestly, it was the younger member who told me she seemed curious. But Kohinata Iroha herself hasn’t officially said anythin’ ’bout wantin’ to join. I’m not ’bout to scout anyone, but if she comes up to me and insists on joinin’, I don’t really see any reason to turn her down.”

“Right...”

“Why d’you ask?”

“For a couple reasons—mostly because I dunno how I feel about it.”

“Huh. Well, you do you.” Otoi didn’t seem bothered that I didn’t go into detail—not that I was surprised—and ended up trudging away instead.

The moment she was out of sight, it suddenly felt like there was about ten percent more oxygen in the air. That was how terrifying being in her presence was. She was really something.

Still, I was glad—*really* glad—that she hadn’t pushed me on those reasons I mentioned.

Because my honest feelings on Krimzon and Otoi was that I hated them both. With a passion.

It didn’t matter how chill they pretended to be: delinquents were delinquents. They deviated from the norm and caused trouble for other people. They were no good. If Otoi found out that was how I felt, we’d probably be found in an abandoned warehouse bundled up in sacks. So thank God that didn’t happen.

There was something else that bothered me too.

I glanced at Ozu. He was still deep in thought, a frown on his face. He’d stopped muttering, and now it looked like his processors had completely frozen up as he failed to come up with a way to describe his sister.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Yeah. Uh. I dunno.”

“This is the kinda question where it’s best just to answer quickly and leave it at that.”

“Really? Sorry that I don’t know about this stuff...”

“Aren’t you close with your sister?”

“We’re not close, but we’re not distant... There’s just...nothing there.”

“Huh?”

That was literally the last thing I’d expect anyone to say when quizzed on their family. It sounded way colder than even hating her guts could be, like this was a dysfunctional family beyond saving.

Were the Kohinata’s family ties really that dire?

But that didn’t make any sense...

“You were talking to her over LIME, weren’t you? That’s how you knew she’d be home soon the other day.”

“I messaged her ’cause I forgot my key, but that was the first time we’d spoken in...two months, I’d say.”

“Wh— Seriously? That’s super weird for siblings.”

The last time I spoke to my parents in person was about a month ago, and they were *abroad* right now. And since then, we’d phoned several times. Was it even possible to go two whole months without speaking to your sister when you lived in the same apartment?

Like I said: weird.

“Is it?” Ozu asked.

“Yeah. It is.”

“I guess I already knew that. But it’s so normal for us I kinda forgot.”

“Don’t your parents say anything about it?”

“Not really. It’s been a long time since dad was around, and mom’s so busy she barely comes home. She doesn’t get involved that much.”

“Right...”

Though he didn’t give me much info to go on, it was pretty clear the Kohinata household wasn’t a normal one. Having said that, Ozu himself wasn’t exactly normal, so it wasn’t much of a surprise, if I really thought about it.

But I’d decided that I would be Ozu’s friend; the friendship I wanted to build wasn’t something so superficial I would pretend everything was fine when I knew that there was something like this bothering him. Though I bet if Ozu had anything to say about it, he’d tell me I was being inefficient, wasting my time, and being too heavily influenced by emotion. Regardless, I genuinely felt I couldn’t let the Kohinata family go on like this.

That was why I said what I did. That was why I decided I would pick the hard option. That was why I took that step that would bring me further away from being a stranger, a classmate, and just a neighbor, and closer to being a true friend.

“Hey, Ozu. Can I come to your house after school today? We could play video games or something.”

Yeah, I know. I didn’t really need a pretext; anyone who’d ever had a friend had probably said that line at least a hundred times in their life. But friendship was a bit of a foreign concept to me—and asking something like that of someone took a huge level of effort.

I visited the Kohinatas’ apartment for the first time that evening.

I stopped by my own place to grab my console, games, and controllers, then walked five seconds to Ozu’s place, where he showed me in with a bright smile.

Since we lived in the same building, the layout of our apartments was basically identical. Even the entranceway looked identical to the one I came home to every day.

The only difference I could pinpoint was the scent. It was a scent I’d never come across before—probably something to do with the detergent or air fresheners they used in this family. The slippers at the entrance were kind of cute too; they had animal patterns on them. I guess that’s what happens when you cohabitate with women.

Though it did make the plain brown-and-gray, function-over-form, mass-produced slippers I kept at my own place feel distinctly *uncute*.

When those differences occurred to me again a second later, they seemed way more trivial. And that was because of the living room; it showed me who the Kohinata family was more than any other room in the apartment.

“Uh... Is this your living room?” I asked.

“Yeah. Is something wrong?”

“No, it’s just...it’s kinda different from mine.”

“Oh, really? How?” Ozu asked, seeming genuinely interested.

“The TV...”

Rather, the absence of one.

The kitchen-diner, the table, the couch, the carpet, and everything else all looked high-class. It wasn’t like one of those uber-fancy places belonging to nouveau riche celebrities you saw on TV or online, but it definitely had this vibe of a middle-class family that was comfortably wealthy, or even on their steady way up the ladder of success.

If I saw *this* place on TV, I’d immediately think a happy family lived there.

But there was still something off about it, beyond the fact there

was no TV. It was like I was being presented with a showroom; not somewhere anybody actually *lived*.

“This is your home, isn’t it?” I blurted out.

“Yeah. I never use the living room, though.”

“You mean you spend all your time in your room?”

“Yeah. In here, I’m only really interested in this.” Ozu ignored the living area, went straight for the refrigerator in the kitchen, and opened the door.

The inside of the fridge was perfectly organized. It was crammed with tupperware boxes that I guessed were filled with ingredients, and most of the drinks were in identical bottles, just with different labels and contents. It was such an efficient use of space that it looked like it belonged to a restaurant rather than a family home.

Ozu picked out two bottles of water—plastic bottles, the kind you could crush up when they were empty. “Want one?”

“Sure... Thanks.”

He was offering his guest water?

I mean, I was fine with water, and honestly I hated the kinds of people who demanded tea or juice and got pissy when you couldn’t accommodate them—but I still felt just a *little* doubtful as I took the bottle and followed Ozu into his room. Because of the living room, I expected it to be just like mine.

Instead, it was like stepping into another world.

“Holy robotics lab, Iron Man...”

Every inch of the floor was covered in instruments of all shapes and sizes. To name just a few things I could see, there were electronic parts, a magnet wire, an electromagnetic coil, enameled wiring, some screws, semiconductors, and more. There were junk parts from what must have been robots and drones lying around too, and it looked just like an inventor’s hideout from a movie.

I suddenly wasn’t sure that Ozu’s first name wasn’t actually Tony.

“If you step on something and break it, I’m gonna lose it,” Ozu said.

“It’ll be your fault for not keeping this place more tidy. I’m impressed you can even work in a room like this.”

“I’ve got everything just where I like it. Everything is organized in the way that makes the most logical sense to me.”

“Don’t you ever lose track of any of the smaller parts?”

“Never,” Ozu said. “Even if I think I have, I just gotta search through my memories and I’ll know where it is right away.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“Cause it is. Also, there’s a theory that having things scattered across a room like this improves creativity and leads to the formation of more original thought.”

“Sounds like an excuse some guy came up with so he didn’t hafta tidy up.”

“Sorry, but it actually comes from an academic study that was properly published as a paper.”

“I’ll stop with the jokes now.”

I wish he’d stop coming at me with info I wasn’t smart enough to reappropriate into a comeback. Keeping my whining to myself, I somehow managed to tiptoe around the stuff on the floor and find a space big enough to sit in.

“Pass me the console. I’ll set it up,” Ozu said.

“Sure thing. That’s a PC monitor there, right?”

“Yeah, but I’ve got an adapter, so it’ll connect just fine.”

Ozu took my Tenchido Button from me and connected it to the monitor. While he was clattering around with that, I turned my attention to the desk in the corner of the room. The PC monitor on it (not the one Ozu was plugging the console into; there were a ton of monitors in this room) was huge and clearly not designed for studying.

What really drew my attention was the homebuilt PC connected to it. The inner workings of it were clearly visible—I didn’t have the knowledge to properly identify the parts, but I guessed I was looking at a CPU or a motherboard or something.

“Did you build that PC by yourself? That’s amazing.”

“Not really. Anyone can build a PC—you can easily find a guide online.”

“You sound like a major leaguer saying ‘anyone can hit a ball.’”

“You’re making assumptions. It’s honestly not that hard.”

Maybe not, if you’ve already got a basic understanding of how computers work.

“Is there any advantage to building your own?” I asked.

“Nah. I did it for fun.”

“Huh. I thought everything you did needed to have a proper reason behind it.”

“If you really wanna get technical, there *are* advantages. The parts are interchangeable, so you could change the CPU to the latest model for example, and get specs way beyond what you’d find on the market.”

“That’s not even that technical.”

“It’s not even that much of an advantage either. Consumer PCs can handle a lot these days. Honestly, probably more than you’ll ever need. A self-built PC wasn’t strong enough for the more advanced research that I wanted to do. I guess the only upside is that I can repair it myself if it gets damaged.”

“I see... But you soldered this part yourself, right? That means you

gotta be good with your hands.”

“Comes from my dad’s side. He used to like making stuff like this too.”

“Your dad? Actually, you don’t have to say anything. Sorry.”

I’d only just learned that the Kohinata’s dad wasn’t in the picture. I didn’t know whether he was dead, missing, or divorced, but I doubted Ozu would want me to pry in any case.

Or so I thought, but Ozu came back with a surprisingly casual reply.

“It’s no biggie. He’s not dead or anything.”

I hesitated. “But he doesn’t live with you?”

“Nope. Mom hasn’t told us much, but I’m pretty sure he’s living abroad and doing whatever he wants.”

“While leaving his kids and wife behind? That’s kinda scummy.”

“You think?”

“*You* don’t?”

The way Ozu spoke about his dad was weird—like his dad was just some stranger.

“I’m guessing dad just wanted to live as happy a life as possible, and if that meant setting himself free and leaving us in Japan, then that’s just how it is.”

“I see your logic, but aren’t parents s’posed to prioritize their kids’ happiness?”

“That works for people who value and are happiest putting their kids first, sure. But dad wasn’t like that. I don’t see it as anything more complicated than that.”

“Again, your argument makes *sense*, but...”

I wasn’t fully satisfied with it. I also didn’t understand why it bothered me so much.

My own home situation was essentially the same: my parents had also gone off to America to fulfill their dreams. I’d made the choice to stay behind for my own reasons, but I was happy to see them go if it meant they could achieve happiness—and I worked hard not to cause any trouble that might hinder them.

I recognized that they had their lives, and I had mine. Ozu felt the same way about his dad, so there shouldn’t have been any reason for me to care so much.

“Okay, I’m done,” Ozu announced, pulling me up from my sea of thought. “What’re we gonna play?”

“Huh? Oh, right.”

At some point the monitor had started displaying the Button’s familiar home screen. I took the controller back from Ozu and started searching for a two-player game among those I had downloaded.

“How about *Marco Racing*?”

“I’m fine with anything. I’ve never played any of these anyway.”

“It’s good for beginners ’cause the controls are pretty intuitive. If you’ve got any questions, ask away and I’ll help you out.”

“Got it. Thanks, Aki.”

Ozu and I sat side by side, facing the screen with our controllers in hand. How long had it been since I played video games with a friend like this?

I used to do it now and then in elementary school, but since starting junior high, I had always played alone. Because I had no friends? Yes, that’s right. You didn’t have to make me say it.

Anyway, that was why that moment felt so new and irreplaceable to me, as cringe as it sounds. Not to mention how I was getting overly emotional about something so small. I would’ve hoped I’d be more mature in my second year of junior high school.

Especially since I hadn’t come to Ozu’s place for the sole purpose of playing games.

I heard the true target of my machinations return home around an hour and a half after we started gaming. The sound that alerted me was the opening and closing of the front door.

She’s here!

“Hey, I’m gonna call it quits for a bit,” I said.

“What, running away ’cause I’m thrashing you so hard?”

“I mean, yeah, your smarts and intuition are crazy good for a beginner. That I just can’t seem to win against them is tearing apart my pride as a gamer, but that’s not why I’m getting up.”

As an expert of *Marco Racing*, I had fully expected to have to give Ozu a ton of advice, but I only won the first round. That was all it took for Ozu to understand the game and even the intricacies of its physics engine perfectly, and he wiped the floor with me from round two onward. Every time he did, he set a new record.

I was well beyond being crushed at my constant defeats and was now instead more excited to see how far Ozu could stretch that record—but that also wasn’t why I was leaving him to it.

“I need the bathroom. Okay if I use yours?”

“Of course.”

“You can play by yourself for a bit.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that.”

“I should probably let you know that I’m probably gonna be a while. So don’t worry if you lose track of time while playing or anything.”

“I didn’t need to know that.”

“I’ll clean up properly, so don’t worry. See ya in a bit.” With that,

I stood up and left the room.

Personally, I considered telling your host you were planning to occupy their bathroom for a long time to be an act of terrorism, but in this case I didn't have a choice. I needed an excuse for why I wouldn't be back right away.

I closed the door behind me and heard the sounds of the game starting up again from the other side. That was good—he'd be safely absorbed in it now. While we were playing together, I got the impression Ozu liked video games, and that he'd be the type to get completely engrossed once he started.

It was probably linked to his programming skills. Seemed like he mentally analyzed the programming that went into the game and tried to work out how he could get the best score as he played. I bet he could spend hours working away at even the simplest of titles.

Now that Ozu was busy, I walked as quietly as possible to the bathroom...went straight past it, and approached the door with the nameplate reading "Iroha" on the front. Then, I pressed my ear to it.

I didn't come to the Kohinatas' apartment to play games. I came here for Kohinata Iroha: Ozu's sister and my kouhai. I wanted to push past the boundaries of common decency, and learn everything about her!

I sounded like a stalker, right? Save your breath; I'm well aware.

I knew I was just one step away from committing an outright crime. That my creepiness was off the charts, and that I deserved to be reported.

But I was Ozu's friend. I couldn't just sit back and do nothing while his little sister showed interest in a gang of thugs. Then there was the fact he couldn't answer right away when asked about his sister, *who he lived with*.

The Kohinata family had to be concealing a dark secret. My mission was to uncover that secret, learn who Kohinata Iroha really was, and then, if I could, stop her from joining that group. Why did I feel responsible for someone who was practically a stranger? Probably because I was a weirdo. Happy?

I heard a muffled voice through the door. "...Don't...me..."

"Is she talking to someone?"

Though I couldn't catch exactly what she was saying, it sounded like a conversation of some kind. I could only hear one voice, though, so it couldn't be that she had a friend over. She must've been on the phone. That, or she was one of those cringey kids who spoke to themselves constantly, but...she didn't seem the type to me.

If the friend she was talking to was the same one Otoi mentioned before, they might be discussing Krimzon.

"I can't hear anything, dammit." I tried repositioning my ear

against the door in an effort to find the spot that let through the most sound.

“...zing...I wanna...o too...”

Got it!

“Do you think I could? The older kids won’t think I’m stepping out of line, will they?”

Score! I can hear her perfectly!

I didn’t realize just moving your ear around a door meant you could get a better sound, but I guess the phrase “you never know till you try” applies to all sorts of things. I could hear her as clearly as though she’d stepped right up to the other side of the door.

Click.

“Huh?”

Was that a sound effect right by my ear just now, or was I imagining things? Actually, “sound effect” makes it sound like a big deal, but really it was just the ordinary noise of a door opening.

“I *like* your music, Tachibana-san, but I don’t really know much about... Huh?”

Next, I heard the crystal clear voice of my friend’s little sister, no longer muffled by a door—and a humanoid shape came into view.

There was a long, long silence. And then, with my neck creaking like Frankenstein’s monster just before his head falls off, I turned to look at the girl in the doorway.

Kohinata Iroha had her phone to her ear and was smiling—probably a remnant of whatever she’d just been saying to her friend. That didn’t change even when she locked eyes with me; it was as though time had frozen. But then, I suddenly noticed that smile getting stiffer with each passing second.

“A...Ah...”

“Don’t scream!”

“Mmrph!”

I quickly slapped one hand over her mouth, and used the other to grab her phone and end the call. I then bundled both of us into her room, and locked the door behind us.

Perfect. Now the friend she was phoning wouldn’t hear her scream, and Ozu wouldn’t get suspicious that there was something weird going on.

I’m pretty good at being a creep, huh? Dunno how I feel about that...

Belatedly, I realized I’d just done something pretty sketchy, and my heart started pounding a mile a minute. I felt cold beads of sweat sliding down my temples.

“I know what you’re thinking, but I’m not up to anything bad!” I said quickly.

“Mmph! Mmmph!” Ozu’s sister was flailing her limbs and glaring

at me with tears in her eyes.

Ugh. Persuading her was going to be difficult.

"I'm gonna let go. Just, please don't scream. I'll let go as soon as you nod."

"Mmph!" There was the nod.

"Thanks. Okay, three, two, one..." I let go.

She gasped for air but, as promised, didn't scream.

Instead, she smacked me right around the face as soon as she had her breath back, her eyes hard.

"O-Ow..."

"What are you doing sneaking around someone else's house, you creep?!"

"I had no choice. But okay, I *was* sneaking around, so I'll say I deserved that slap."

"Hey, you're that guy who was with Ozuma the other day, right?"

"Yeah, Ooboshi. I live next door."

"Okay, and why did you have no choice but to sneak into your neighbor's house and listen in on my conversation? Don't tell me you fell for me at first sight so hard, you turned into a pervert?"

"Please. You're making it sound like I only care about looks."

"So you think I'm attractive? You're not sounding any less creepy right now, you know."

"Ngh. Stop being so perceptive. Anyone ever tell you you're kinda rude?"

"No one. Because I don't go around calling people creepy unless they deserve it," Ozu's sister said, wrapping her arms around herself defensively and pulling back from me.

Her words and the way she was looking at me might have been unkind, but her tone was still perfectly mild and polite. She didn't seem like the aggressive type at all; she gave off the impression of a serious but kind honor student. Although deep down, she must have thought pretty highly of herself if she naturally assumed I'd fallen for her at first sight.

"Why were you coming outta your room anyway?" I asked. If she hadn't, she wouldn't have found me.

"I live here. I can do what I want."

"Well, yeah, but..."

"I was just going to get myself a drink. Talking on the phone made me thirsty."

"That's way too normal."

"It's a normal day and I'm doing normal things! At least, it *was* a normal day until *you* showed up!"

"Gee, thanks." Just then the phone in my hand vibrated, and the name "Tachibana Asagi" appeared on the screen. Maybe this was the

Krimzon member who'd made friends with Iroha. "Tachibana Asagi?" I questioned.

"She's probably calling back because she got worried when I hung up without warning. Give me the phone back; it's rude to look at who's calling me."



“Sorry...”

She snatched the phone away from me and answered the call. “Hello, Tachibana-san? Sorry for hanging up like that. We’ve got a family friend over, and I have to help out. I’ll call you again when I’m done.” After a couple more brief exchanges, she hung up again. Flinging the phone onto her bed, she turned to me. “Tell me then: why did you have no choice?”

“That girl you’re calling—is it true she’s helping you get into Krimzon?” It was a purposely leading question, though I didn’t want to go too far with it.

Ozu’s sister quickly averted her gaze. “What are you talking about? Sounds to me like you’re trying to stir up trouble without any proof.”

“I know you’re trying to play dumb. It’s not gonna work.”

“Huh?”

“If you really didn’t know what I was talking about, you’d start by asking what ‘Krimzon’ is. And how do you know that an accusation you want to join would mean ‘trouble’?”

“U-Um, because, I... Tachibana-san told me about it! Wait, no! I mean...”

She’d walked right into my trap, and watching her flail about in it was actually pretty fun. Krimzon was a delinquent group in *her* school. It wouldn’t be weird for her to have heard of it, and it wouldn’t be weird for her to get mad at me for saying she was trying to join. Yet she got flustered when I had started talking like even knowing the name Krimzon was a bad thing, and now I had her right where I wanted her.

“I’ve caught you out now, so there’s no point lying anymore. You’re interested in joining this group, right?”

“So what if I am? It’s got nothing to do with you.” As she became defiant, the panicked look on her face immediately set itself into something more confident.

“I’m not just gonna let my friend’s sister join the dark side. What kinda friend would?”

“You’re my brother’s friend, not mine, so you shouldn’t be meddling. What kinda decent person would?”

She had me there.

Maybe if she were *my* sister, I could make a case for myself, but she wasn’t. I was practically a stranger—okay, not even “practically.” I was a total stranger. If Ozu were sticking his nose too far into her affairs, she’d probably get annoyed. Since it was me, someone who wasn’t even related to her, she’d probably skipped right past “annoyed” to arrive at “grossed out.”

Those were the facts of the situation, and I knew it. But if being gross was enough to stop me, I wouldn't have made it this far.

Honestly speaking, I didn't really care if Kohinata Iroha joined a gang of delinquents. She was free to do as she liked. I was doing this for Ozu; I felt bad for *his* situation. He was a nice guy, but because his personality and behavior didn't conform to the norm, he was misunderstood, and made the class's outcast.

If word got out that his sister had joined an infamous gang, my mission to make him a place to belong would become outright impossible. He'd be excluded and left even more alone than he already was. As his friend, I couldn't let that happen.

"Why d'you wanna join this group?" I asked. "If it's got something to do with trouble at home, you can tell me. There might be another solution."

"I see, so you're saying I just need to talk it out?"

"You get it?"

"Yes. I've got this problem, actually. I think I can get it solved right away, but I need your help."

"Okay, nice! Lemme hear it."

What do you know? Even the frostiest of people will open up if you just talk sense to them. Or was I dealing with a genuine tsundere here?

Kohinata Iroha smiled sweetly at me. "My brother's friend is practically stalking me! He's so very annoying. And I don't know how to get him to leave my room!"

"Oh. That's the angle you were going for, huh?"

Hello harsh reality, my old friend...

"Iroha-chan used to be *cold*?"

"When we first met, yeah. Hard to imagine looking at her now, right?"

"It's not just hard... It's downright impossible..."

"Trust me, I know exactly how you feel."

"She sounds just like me. I dunno if I like her stealing my character traits..."

"I should've known *that's* what you would worry about."

Chapter 2: My Friend's Little Sister's Friend Is a Pain in the Butt!

The moment I arrived at school the next day, I made a tactical advance right for the hallway where the first-years' classrooms were. Needless to say, my target was my friend's little sister... 's friend, Tachibana Asagi.

My direct strike on Iroha herself had unfortunately ended in failure yesterday, and I'd been forced to retreat. My opponent's defenses were tighter than I had anticipated, and I now realized that a simple head-on assault wouldn't work; it was time to sneak in from behind enemy lines. There was just one problem.

I had no idea what her friend looked like.

I knew her name, and that was it. I didn't even know which class she was in. If she was part of a delinquent group, I figured she'd look like a delinquent—but what did that mean, exactly? Was I looking for someone with a mohawk or a pompadour? Her hair would be dyed, right? But then, there were plenty of girls who dyed their hair brown or blonde as a fashion statement, rather than as a form of rebellion.

While I was busy pulling my metaphorical hair out, first-years filed past me, casting suspicious glances in my direction. They thought I was weird enough already; I'd lose nothing by plucking up the courage to ask some questions. For some reason, I felt especially gutsy today.

"Can I ask you something?!" I called out to a girl who'd just passed me.

"Ah!"

Her surprise didn't put me off from launching into my question. "D'you know a Tachibana Asagi? She's s'posed to be a first-year."

"U-Um, do I know her? Well, she's in my class... Um, who are you?"

"Does it matter? I just wanna talk to Tachibana-san. Could you show me your classroom?"

"I can, but there'd be no point."

"Why not?"

"Tachibana-san doesn't come to school much," the girl explained.

"Oh...right. Yeah...same for Otoi. She's in our class."

Apparently, delinquents skipped more school days than they attended. It wasn't like I was a saint, or even just a stickler when it

came to the rules, but in this case, Tachibana Asagi's truancy was annoying. Didn't she know she could get in trouble for this kinda behavior?

"Where can I find her, then?" I asked.

"I'm...not sure. I don't know much about her. There are rumors she likes to hit the town after dark, but I don't know where she hangs out during the day."

"Okay... Thanks for your time. I'll try asking someone else."

I let the girl go and wandered down the hallway again in search of more sources.

I was asking around for a while, with no luck. I guess I should've expected this. Why would anyone here know the whereabouts of some rebel who barely came to school? Especially when she belonged to Krimzon, who seemed particularly bad.

"Is there anything I can do at this point except give up?"

I'd thought the most efficient way to get to the bottom of what Iroha was up to was through this Tachibana Asagi, but if she was going to be an even more difficult target, then I didn't have any options left.

But wait...

"If she never comes to school, then how did Ozu's sister meet her *and* become friends with her? They'd barely have the chance to talk to each other..."

I guess they could have been friends since elementary school, but that felt like a bit of a long shot to me. Though it was hardly conclusive evidence, the way Iroha had been talking to her on the phone didn't make it sound like they were old friends at all. There'd still been that hint of formality you get with someone you've only just gotten to know.

So, if they hadn't met here at school, where *could* they have met?

Think. What was Iroha saying on the phone right before she found me outside her door?

"I like your music, Tachibana-san, but I don't really know much about..."

Music. That was my clue.

The second the thought popped into my head, I looked around the hallway and spotted a preppy girl wearing earphones. I practically charged at her as I said, "H-Hey. Could I ask you something?"

"Huh?! Wh-What?!" Startled, she stared at me wide-eyed as she pulled out the earphones.

I came at her with the same question as before. "D'you know Tachibana Asagi? I think she's into making music or something."

"Music... Tachibana... Oh yeah, she's in class five. The one who always skips school, right?"

“That’s her. Do you know where I could find her, apart from school?”

“Uh...” The girl’s eyes were cold as she looked at me. Clearly she thought I was the type of guy who liked to pick up girls in the middle of the day. Frustratingly enough, it was a perfectly normal reaction. Trying to change her mind here would take a good deal of effort on my part.

“Yeah! I’ve got mad respect for Tachibana’s tunes! Gotta hear ’em again; haven’t heard ’em in moons! Been chasin’ that bad girl around, hope I see her soon...s!”

Perfect flow, perfect rhythm, perfect technique. It was a tasteful mini-performance that only a music lover would understand—and it was just what I needed to get this girl to open up to me.

She burst out laughing. “Oh my God, that was so *lame*!”

“Cut me some slack! I did my best as an amateur, okay? That was a hundred percent improvisation!”

“You did a good job at making me laugh at least!” She spluttered, holding her sides. “But I can see how much you love music, so it’s cool.” The girl wiped the tears from her eyes. “Tachibana always performs out near the station.”

“The station? What, downtown?”

“There’s that park there, right? That’s where. I woulda thought that’s where you heard her the first time too.”

“Oh, yeah, well... Ha ha...” I laughed awkwardly. It was a poor attempt at covering the holes in my story, but she didn’t push it.

“She spends the mornings by that park, then once school’s out, she moves to that one park near the neighborhood.”

“The neighborhood...” I pictured the area around my apartment building. There were several ways to get to school from there, and one of them did indeed involve passing a park. Supposing Kohinata Iroha happened to see Tachibana Asagi performing in that park on her way home... That gave them a way to know each other even if Tachibana barely came to school. “I got it! Thanks for the info, music girl!”

“Music girl? Uh, okay... But yeah, I hope you manage to meet her!”

“Thanks!”

I ran away down the hallway, feeling like the male lead in some feel-good high school movie. I took out my phone and made for the shoe lockers by the front entrance, making a call on the way.

“Hello? This is second-year Ooboshi. Could you let Hayashi-sensei know I’ve got a fever and won’t be in today?”

I gave my notice of absence, which was the rule if you weren’t going to be in school—all while running through the hallways and outright lying. I was still trying to figure out where that left me on the

scale of honor student to delinquent as I changed my shoes by the lockers, and ran against the current of inbound students like a carp jumping up a waterfall.

I was out of the school building before the day had even begun; I couldn't possibly wait till it was over. I needed to find Tachibana before she could make contact with Iroha. My friend's little sister was too stubborn, and once she was in the picture, I'd have lost my chance. If I wanted to fix things, I needed to catch Tachibana alone.

Running full pelt under the scorching flames of the summer sun was outright suicidal. By the time I'd made it to the area by the station, my head was fuzzy, sweat was gluing my shirt to my skin, and my knees were knocking like they were laughing at me.

The bottle of citrus-flavored sports drink I bought from the vending machine was empty in seconds. My brain cells were on the verge of drying out; I didn't have the time to appreciate how rare it was to find lemon Aquarius in this day and age. I was too busy filling my body with water, salt, and minerals.

"Whew! Okay, I'm all topped up... Now I can move again..."

With all the energy of a zombie, at least.

The drink was a stopgap measure—my health bar had taken far more damage of an unusual type and over a longer period of time than could be fixed by a sports drink. The air in front of me looked hazy, and I couldn't tell if it was a mirage, or if I was suffering from heatstroke.

But I couldn't afford to collapse. Not yet.

The park was just a little bit further. I needed to make it. I needed to meet Tachibana Asagi!

"He yelled and we met, there on the roadway..."

I gasped. "That voice... That sound!"

A husky female voice sang along to the riffing of a guitar. Strangely, the lyrics seemed to match my current situation exactly. It was like a representation of our fated encounter. It was like she was celebrating that I'd made it to the finish line.

"A scorpion's poison, the claws of a bear! Dead in an instant like you were never there!"

"Wait, I'm gonna die?!"

That would be a problem. But to be fair, I was close to collapsing from heatstroke.

"Hm?" My outraged shout seemed to have caught her attention. The girl removed her fingers from the guitar strings and looked up at me—I stood in front of her at the park entrance.

She had this look about her like a curious cat. That was my first

impression. Her almond-shaped eyes widened as they caught sight of me, like they'd picked up on the movements of a mouse. Her shoulder-length blonde hair was covered by a beanie, and her ears marked by huge earrings. She was probably the most stereotypically delinquent girl I'd ever seen.

"Hey, that's my school's garb. You skippin', bro?"

"Right back at you. School's on, and you're out here playing guitar."

"Serious type, huh? But yeah. Here."

"Here?" I stared at her outstretched hand.

"C'mon. Gimme some change. You listened to my song, right?"

"Only 'cause you're playing music in a public place! No way am I paying!"

I knew there was a tradition of musicians playing on the roadside hoping for money from passing strangers, but trying to force me to pay when I had no choice but to listen was nothing short of a scam.

When I put my foot down, the scammer's brow visibly creased. "Huh?! After I played you a great tune? Where're your manners?!"

"Where are *yours*? I've been ripped off before, but *forcing* people to pay when you're busking? That's a new low."

"Man, I'm so *done*! This is why I hate poor people. If you're finished, beat it. I've got no time for a guy who doesn't know how to show a little kindness and invest in talent."

"Wh..."

What was with this girl? She was so...*annoying*! Possibly more annoying than anyone else I'd ever met in my entire life.

"Y'know, when I heard about you, I didn't think you'd be such a pain. What's Ozu's sister doing making friends with someone like you? Or maybe I got the wrong girl..."

"Hold up, bro. You know me?"

"Tachibana Asagi?"

She nodded.

Damn.

Remember when I decided trying to convince Iroha was a waste of time, so I'd come talk things through with this girl instead? Yeah. Between her and Iroha, this game went beyond easy, medium, or hard, and straight to nightmare mode. There was no winning anymore.

"Did you come here looking for me?" Tachibana asked. "That's like molten chili levels of creepy!"

"Most people don't compare creepiness levels to instant ramen, y'know."

Its strange innovativeness just made it hurt more. The annoying scamming busker girl, aka Tachibana Asagi, glared at me like I was

something she'd found on the bottom of her shoe. "It's creepy," she repeated. "You skipped school to come find me. There's stalkerish, and then there's you!"

"Who're you calling a stalker? I wouldn't even be here if you weren't involved with Ozu's sister!"

"Sister... Wait, are you the perv who was at Iroha's place?!"

"She told you that *already*?!"

I was only there last night. The female information network moved way too quickly.

"Ew. Barging into Iroha's place wasn't enough, so now you've come to bother me. Classic perv."

"I'm *not* a perv! I just—"

"*Yeah, I'm just a creep. Perving on goddesses while they sleep. Every girl out there is mine! Yeah!*"

"You mind *not* breaking into song for no reason?!"

"It's a habit of mine. Soon as I hear something that fits, I'm improvising. *Just wanna smell her clothes. Panties or bra, in the bag it goes. I'm like Pythagoras and his dominos.*"

"I don't care if you call it improvisation, now you're just making false accusations!"

She did *not* have to keep putting so much thought into those rhymes.

Tachibana snickered. "You're pretty funny, bro. Creepy, but funny. Iroha said you were a piece of shit, but I dunno, I think I like you."

"Uh... You should probably think more carefully before telling guys you 'like' them."

"Ew. Creep."

"And you should definitely think more carefully before calling people creeps for no reason!"

"Aha ha ha! I only said 'like,' and now you're losing your shit! Lemme guess: you're a virgin? Pffff! Anyway, you're in one of the grades above, right? What's your name again?"

"Yeah... I'm Ooboshi Akiteru. Second-year."

"Ooboshi Akiteru... Eh, I'm never gonna remember that."

"You asked, and I delivered. Besides, you could easily remember if you put in the teeniest amount of effort. But I'm guessing you're not gonna do that?"

"Not about someone I don't care about, no. Can I just go the easy route and call ya Senpai?"

"I don't really care what you call me..."

"Senpai, then. It's actually hilarious how you're a total virgin, even though you're older than me!"

"Sh-Shut up."

She did realize I was in junior high school, right? Though I guess there *had* been those rumors ever since we graduated elementary that this guy and that girl slept together, and that so-and-so got around or whatever.

I always thought they were closer to urban legends than anything else, though. I mean, everyone's kinda obsessed with that stuff, so surely they were just inflating these rumors and the truth was that everyone was just as inexperienced as me...right?

Ugh. There was no point thinking about something I'd never get concrete answers for anyway. I might as well just interpret the information I did have in a way that suited me.

"Aha ha ha ha! Your face is bright red, Senpai! What, is being called a virgin really that much of a big deal to you? How pathetic!"

"You don't let anything go, do you?! And my face is *not* red!"

"It so *is*! Brighter than the cherries you never got to pop!

Uh...wait..."

"You think... You think you're clever?"

"W-Wait... Your face is *too* red... Uh, S-Senpai? You good?"

"Stheriouslythly? I'm not stho pathetic I need you to worry 'bout me..."

What was that? Why wasn't my tongue working?

Tachibana's face suddenly became unclear, like it was pixelated, and then the world began to spin. Then...black.

"He fainted?! Senpai! Wait, is this a joke? Senpai? Senpai!"

Her panicked voice sounded far away, like I was a fish in an aquarium. As my consciousness faded, I heard my thoughts, as though spoken by somebody else.

Dehydration... I guess a single bottle of yellow Aquarius was never gonna be enough...

And then.

My consciousness sank.

To the bottom of a dark pool.

After letting go of my consciousness, I dreamed I was a baby. My mom was cradling me in her arms and rocking me gently. I could see her face right in front of me, brimming with affection. Somewhere in the air was the faint scent of milk. Something soft was pressed against my cheek, comfortably enveloping my skin in human warmth. Someone was singing.

Of course—*clang, clang*—it was a mother's soothing lullaby—*clang, clang*—designed to lead her child—*screech*—into dreamland—*bwang!*

"Shut! Up!"

I jumped up with a scream.

What was with that guitar? Was this a death metal show?! You're s'posed to play Mozart to babies, not whatever *that* was!

"Finally awake, huh, sunshine?"

"Sun... Wait, Otoi?"

"Sup. 'Sme."

What was she doing here, right next to me? Didn't she have better things to do, like playing hooky or leading her gang of thugs?

And why was she...sitting like *this*?

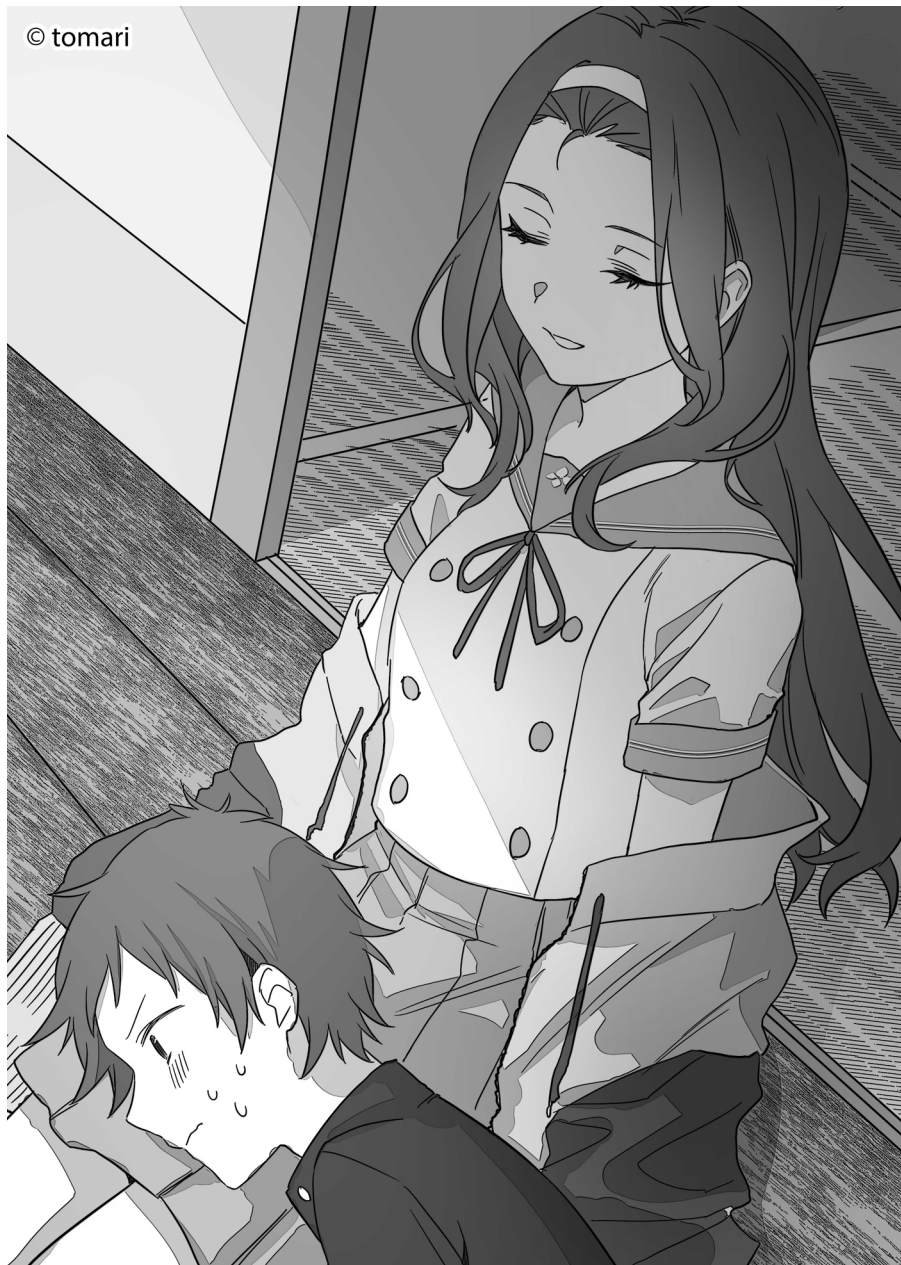
"Don't move too much, yeah? Stay there a bit longer."

"Stay— Gah!"

Otoi tugged my shirt and forced me back down onto her lap.

"Has... Has my head been here this whole time?"

"Yeah. Y'were sleepin' like a baby. Kinda funny how defenseless y'were."



“Ah... Ba ba ba ba ba...”

Sweat suddenly sprang up from every pore of my body. It felt like my core temperature was rising. At this rate, I'd get heatstroke all over again. That softness against my cheek? Otoi's thigh.

It was the classic ear-cleaning position, a staple of the top share of leading lap-pillow industry companies. The guy's bare cheek against the girl's bare thigh, put both of them in the same boat; the result of an unspoken, intimacy-based antitrust law.

I bet you're wondering what the hell I'm talking about. Same. I was confused, okay? Just ignore the shitstorm of random vocabulary.

“Just relax... Good boy...”

It was clear by her tone she couldn't be bothered with any of this. Way to sound comforting, Otoi.

But there was more at play here than tone. I was currently resting my head on a girl's lap, and she was stroking my head—which just made things all the more devastating. My brain couldn't take much more of this. Any longer, and I was at risk of dying by hyperventilation. Which was a bad thing.

“I kinda freaked when Asagi called me up cryin' her eyes out. She said y'were dyin'.”

That must've happened after I fainted in the park. I guess even someone as unbearable as Tachibana had the good sense to get medical attention for someone who collapsed right in front of her.

“If she'd called an ambulance, she'd hafta explain everythin', 'n' they'd get in touch with her parents. So she rang me instead. Didn't want her parents to find out she was skippin' school.”

I take it back. She'd rather risk my life than get in trouble with her parents? Unbelievable.

“Luckily I was nearby, so I came right over. Our family employs our own doctor, who I convinced to come see to you.”

Their *own* doctor? What were they, royalty?

“He said y'were all good, so I've been takin' care of you at the house since then. That doctor, he's smarter 'n' more skilled than any other in the area, so y'were fine even without goin' to the hospital. Y'gotta lot to thank Asagi for.”

Again, a *family* doctor—one who was apparently better than any other. Was it going to be “Otoi-sama” from now on?

Anyway, thanks to Otoi having me on her knee, I was totally fine (aside from my elevated heart rate). I definitely felt way more refreshed than I would've expected someone who'd collapsed from dehydration to be, like I'd just taken the perfect nap. I figured that had more to do with whatever the doctor did, rather than the healing powers of Otoi's thighs.

“Uh... Um... Thank you,” I said.

“Sure. Y’gotta take care in the hot weather from now on, yeah?”

“Yeah. By the way, where are we?”

“My place, like I said. Well, my family’s place.”

“You took me to your home?” While Otoi had been talking, my mind had cleared to the point I was able to take in my surroundings. “Just look at this place...”

This house was probably as traditional as it got. Otoi was nursing me on the outside corridor, which had a sweeping view of a classical Japanese garden. The surface beneath my butt was definitely wooden. There was an open sliding door that let in a pleasantly cool draft, bringing with it the smells of wood and tatami from inside. Then, there was...

“GWOOOOOORGH!”

...an ear-grating roar that didn’t match the refined scenery in the slightest.

For whatever reason, a group of four people wearing excessive makeup were strumming their instruments and shouting in the middle of the traditional Japanese garden.

“My ears!” I moaned. “Ugh, now I remember! It’s these guys’ fault I woke up!”

Otoi chuckled. “They’re incredible, huh? Takes real talent to pull off a death growl like that.”

“What are you laughing about? Haven’t you thought of the poor neighbors?”

“I have, actually, ’n’ that’s why we’re doin’ this in the middle of the day. But yeah, what I really need is some soundproofin’.”

“I dunno if it’s the time of day that’s a problem. Who are those guys, anyway?”

“Members of Krimzon. Specifically, they’re Downtown Asakusa Metal—a group hopin’ to make it as a death metal band.”

“We’re nowhere near Asakusa...unless the group has some link with it?” I asked.

“Nope. Not at all.”

“How the heck did they get to decide on that name, then?!”

“They were inspired by the kind of death metal bands that do stuff like put ‘Detroit’ in their name for no reason. ’Cept they wanted to grab a Japanese location. So yeah, Asakusa.”

“I dunno why I expected anything more sophisticated from a bunch of kids...”

Their full faces of demonic makeup also looked like they were inspired by a certain manga. For a bunch of delinquents, they sure did know their niche manga series.

“Hm... Since you’re awake now, I reckon I may as well introduce

ya,” Otoi drawled. She raised both hands in the air and clapped loudly. “Line up, guys!”

“Ah! Coming!”

At Otoi’s summons, the band members stopped what they were doing to line up in the garden. The four of them stood to attention with perfect posture. I didn’t realize troublemakers emulated the army when it came to discipline.

Were these four the only members of Krimzon, then? I would’ve expected way more for a group that inspired so much fear in the student population—but no, this couldn’t have been all of them. Not even Tachibana was there.

“Otoi-san! I’m here! Sorry I’m late!”

Speak—uh, think—of the devil; after a hectic thumping of footsteps, Tachibana Asagi appeared from inside the house.

“Sorry we’re late!” came another voice.

“Sorry!” Then three more.

And then there were several more: kids with hair so colorful it announced to the world they were rebels. Some came from inside, some from behind the garden, others from the house’s entranceway. They came relentlessly, like video game enemies in a raid. There had to be at least ten—if not close to twenty.

Lined up as they were, they filled the entire garden, with each of their gazes focused directly on me and Otoi.

Meaning... Wait a sec... This bunch of rebels were all staring at me lying with my head on Otoi’s lap.

It was utterly humiliating. Not to mention that this girl was their leader. What if they beat me up for touching her legs so disrespectfully?

The blood drained from my face as I imagined what might happen in ten seconds. I knew I had to get up as quickly as possible, but it was like our skin was stuck together—and it was so comfortable I couldn’t bring myself to move!

I could feel the sharp gazes of the delinquents on me as I lay, immobilized. They opened their mouths wide, flashing their teeth and ready to howl at me.

“Krimzon, at your service! Otoi-san, Ooboshi-san!”

I had my teeth clamped together and my eyes shut...but when nothing happened, I opened them a crack, confused. Something stuck out to me in their greeting.

“Ooboshi...san?”

“Oh, right,” Otoi said. “Forgot to tell you. You’re my boyfriend now.”

“Ah, gotcha. Wait... What?!”

“Keep it down, would ya? You’re gonna deafen me.”

“You can’t just drop a bombshell like that and pretend it’s no big deal! We’re not da—” Otoi clapped her hand over my mouth before I could finish.

So, not only had she stolen my first time lying on a girl’s lap; her hand had stolen my first kiss! Seriously, what was up with this girl?!

Actually, *was* it my first kiss? I remember touching mouths with someone fairly recently, but...I couldn’t remember who.

Well, whatever.

Otoi leaned down to whisper in my ear. “I couldn’t exactly get our doctor to treat a total stranger—I had to pretend y’were my boyfriend ‘n’ that we were plannin’ to get married someday. Was easier than explainin’ the truth.”

“I think I’ve discovered a whole new level of lazy.”

“Sno big deal, is it? Otherwise, y’woulda been screwed.”

“I *am* grateful that you got me a doctor, but why does that mean these delinquents have gotta treat me with respect? They know it’s just a cover, right?”

“No. Couldn’t be bothered explainin’ to ‘em.”

“I’d think this important enough to *be* bothered! What the hell is wrong with you?!”

Never in a million years would *I* date the leader of a delinquent group. An unsociable type like me? We were like water and oil, cats and dogs, opposite poles of a magnet... Wait, scratch that last one. Anyway, my point is, our compatibility was *zero*.

She had comfortable thighs; I’d give her that. But I wasn’t prepared to have a romantic relationship with the head of a bunch of wannabe criminals, even if that relationship was a lie. I was ready to stand up right now and let these guys know that what Otoi told them wasn’t the least bit true!

“Look, I’m just sayin’ I needed a *real* good reason for takin’ care of a nonmember from the outside world. Otherwise these guys’d beat y’into next year for causin’ their leader trouble.”

“I love you so much, my darling! Let’s never part!”

Forget what I said about standing up. I had far from the required number of balls for that.

My sudden burst of passion had Otoi chuckling. “Y’really are a hoot. I think they call that bein’ easy. Not that I’d know.”

“Shut it...”

“Nyway, probably best if y’make sure y’act like my boyfriend when everyone’s around. Not that I care.”

“I’ll do it ‘cause you saved me. Not ‘cause I’m terrified of getting beat up.”

“Wanna kiss? It’ll make it more convincin’.”

“We can’t *kiss*! Even if we were actually dating, we’re too young

for kissing!”

Otoi laughed. “Sweet summer child. You’re hilarious.”

I wasn’t hilarious. *She* wasn’t treating these matters with appropriate respect. Tachibana had been on my case about being a virgin as well—didn’t these thugs have any sense of virtue?

“Y’got nothin’ to worry about. ’Slong as you’re my boyfriend...”

Otoi glanced at the delinquents gathered in the garden, sending a zap of nervous excitement through their ranks.

“Long live Otoi! Long live Ooboshi!”

“They’re the best couple I’ve ever seen! Krimzon’ll never die! Yeah!”

The members of Krimzon cheered for us, putting very limited thought into what they were actually saying. I could almost hear the intelligence stored in my skull melting down to leak out of my ears. My eyes met with Otoi, who was grinning smugly.

“...these guys’ll treat y’with the same respect they do me.”

That was how I started a fake relationship with Otoi, leader of the infamous Krimzon.

There was one thing bothering me: Tachibana should know that Otoi and I weren’t really dating. I needed to make sure she wouldn’t talk, or I was probably looking at a heap of trouble later on.

I glanced at her face, lined up with the other members, and I thought I caught a glimpse of a grin.

Yeah. I was probably right to be worried.

“Stabbing, beating, explosion, or being run over. How d’you wanna die, Aki? Take your pick.”

“If it’s fine by you, Mashiro-san, I’d rather not die at all.”

“First, Iroha-chan steals my treating you like crap shtick...and now I find out you already had a fake girlfriend before me! I might as well not exist...”

“I don’t care about those parts of your identity, Mashiro. You’re important because you’re you.”

“Yeah, I’ve also seen those inspirational memes on my social media, thanks. You’re not getting me to cheer up like *that*.”

“How can I get you to cheer up, then?”

“Say something like, ‘I can’t give you my firsts, but you’ll always have my lasts.’”

“I can’t make a commitment like that! Also, am I wrong, or does that sound kinda like a death threat?!”

“Hey, we’re still in the Ferris wheel, right? And we’ve just made it to the very top.”

“Quit it! Please, stop talking—and thinking!”

“Actually, aren’t we about to go around *again*? Are we allowed to stay on the ride for this long?”

“We can stay on as long as we want. That’s what it means to be an LVIP...”

Ooboshi Akiteru was added to the group.



Otoi

BF's in the chat now. Be nice, guys.



Ooboshi Akiteru

Thank you. Hello, everyone. I'm Ooboshi Akiteru.



Thouzer

HELLOOO!



SATOSHI

Mad respect for getting Otoi-san to fall in love with you!



Giant Gouda

Wicked. Let's go for ramen.



Sasori the Scorpion

We're past the time when gals gotta forget about obsessing over guys. Guys rock! I'm gonna find one myself so I can be just like Otoi-san!



Asagi

Didn't know you two were dating. Here I was thinking you were a virgin, but you did the deed, huh?



Ooboshi Akiteru

Of course I'm not a v-v-virgin!



Otoi

We don't do that kinda stuff. Our relationship isn't like that.



Thouzer

Huh?



Giant Gouda

I'm hungry. Want ramen.



SATOSHI

So Ooboshi-senpai's not a virgin, but Otoi-san's saying their relationship is pure?



Ooboshi Akiteru

Gah! I totally mistimed that!



Sasori the Scorpion

So you're cheating on her?! You got guts messing around our leader like that. Gimme your hands! Your fingers are getting the chop!



Ooboshi Akiteru

I'm sorry please forgive me I was trying to make myself look experienced but I am actually a virgin.



Otoi

What he's saying is that we were really physical in the early stages, but now that our relationship has calmed down, we're satisfied with just having a spiritual connection.



Thouzer

You guys contradicted each other again.



SATOSHI

Ooboshi-senpai says he's a virgin, but Otoi-san says they've done it...



Sasori the Scorpion

You're making your girl embarrass herself while you pretend to be pure? You got guts letting our leader take the fall!



Ooboshi Akiteru

This chat is lethal! I can't explain, but please just believe me when I say this is a major misunderstanding!



Otoi

That's right, Sasori. We don't wanna be actual gangsters, do we? We're just regular troublemakers, so enough with those kinda threats.



Sasori the Scorpion

Right... Sorry, Otoi-san! I oughta take responsibility... It's seppuku time!



Ooboshi Akiteru

Now you're a samurai? Can you please stop having an identity crisis?!



Otoi

Yeah. Troublemakers like us solve their disputes with their fists, one on one.



Ooboshi Akiteru

I don't wanna fight like that either...



Asagi

Pffft!



Asagi

This is even more entertaining than I thought it'd be, Senpai!



Ooboshi Akiteru

Tachibana... You're teasing me right now, aren't you?

Chapter 3: The Delinquent Leader Can't Be Bothered with Me!

I found myself a girlfriend. I wished I hadn't found myself a girlfriend.

Not only that, but she was the leader of a delinquent gang that struck fear in hearts far and wide; the type of girl I never *once* thought I'd end up with. It was a fake relationship, of course, invented by Otoi on the fly. I knew there was a massive difference between this and a serious relationship based on love.

But it was the first time people saw me as someone with a girlfriend, and that made me feel strangely giddy. I wasn't in love with Otoi, but as a boy taking his first steps into puberty, it was impossible for me *not* to notice she had a pretty face, and also impossible not to think about the time I lay on her lap. So I was sort of proud of the news that she was my girlfriend spreading, even if I knew it wasn't real.

When I got up that morning to wash my face and I looked in the mirror, I had this small, goofy smile going on. Can anyone blame me for that, though? Didn't think so.

What sorta message should I send Otoi over LIME today?

Even if we weren't actually boyfriend and girlfriend, we could still go on dates, right?

Whaddya mean I'm getting ahead of myself? That I've forgotten the entire reason I wanted to learn more about Krimzon in the first place?

I *hadn't* forgotten. Just let me dope myself up with my fluffy fantasies a little longer, please and thank you.

I mean, look at this:

"Good morning, Akiteru-san!"

The moment I stepped out of my apartment building, I was confronted with hellish reality. Four death metal bandmates, dressed up to fit the part, their arms slumped over their pimped-out bicycle handles as they waited for me.

They were, of course, those Krimzon members.

"Hey. You guys shouldn't travel in such a massive group. You'll get in people's way."

"Yup! That's just what you said yesterday! That's why it's only Downtown Asakusa Metal that's come to get you today, instead of the

whole of Krimzon!" The speaker was a grinning guy with demon-like makeup and spiky shoulder pads. His LIME ID was Thouzer.

With him were SATOSHI, who wore a backwards baseball cap; Giant Gouda, a larger individual; and a girl with long dark hair who wore a black mask: Sasori the Scorpion. They were a noisy bunch, even over LIME.

They were also living in the distant past, apparently. I didn't know there were still rebels around who were essentially prehistoric fish. Wouldn't it be best to hand them over to a national research institute, where they could be preserved?

Having said that, I was the one being escorted by these delinquents to school. If they were fish, I was a trilobite. I was overly aware of the other students' stares as we walked by. No one had ever paid so much attention to me on my way to school before. They weren't good stares either; they were cold and fearful, and made me feel awkward. A vision of me waking up in the middle of the night and severely cringing at this memory ten years down the line flashed before my eyes.

"You're really sure? We could getcha to school in no time if you just hopped on the back of my bike."

"You gotta be kidding me. I'm a man; I'll walk. Gotta keep my leg muscles in good shape."

"Aw man, you're so cool! No wonder Otoi-san picked you!"

"I'm gonna walk too!"

"Anyone wanna come get ramen?"

"D'you even know any other words, Gouda? How about learning a trick from Akiteru-san instead of stuffing your face all day?"

"No... I just love ramen way too damn much!"

I let out a covert sigh while the dumbest conversation I'd ever heard took place behind me. This was my second day going to school with Downtown Asakusa Metal, and I'd learned that they might have been stupid, but they didn't seem to be bad kids. Though not all of Krimzon was overly loyal, these guys plus Tachibana definitely held absolute trust and respect for Otoi. That much was clear from the way they treated her boyfriend (I'm not gonna bother qualifying it anymore) with as much reverence as they did her.

Incidentally, Otoi had told them to escort me to school. According to her, anything that happens in one delinquent gang quickly spreads to all the others. That I was dating Krimzon's leader gave me value as a hostage, and so I was given bodyguards to protect against kidnapping.

If she *knew* fake-dating her was going to put me in danger, I'd rather she hadn't decided on it, especially out of laziness. But it was too late to do anything about it now. All I could do was prepare

myself in case the worst happened.

I wasn't even a delinquent, and yet it felt like this whole ordeal would be giving me stat boosts to my courage and grit that I didn't even need. If things went on like this, wouldn't I end up becoming one of them for real?

Eventually, we made it to school.

"Just so you know, you don't have to stick with me inside the building," I said. "They don't let outsiders into the school anyway."

"Outsiders?" Thouzer said. "We're students here."

"Then you'll wanna clear that makeup off your face and get into uniform," I advised.

They may have been students, but I would have liked to see how long they could last before a teacher kicked them out, dressed like that.

They seemed to understand what I was saying, and so Downtown Asakusa Metal turned away and left, leaving me to step through the school gates alone. I let out a sigh of relief. At last, peace. Until I got to the classroom, that was.

My appearance in the classroom provoked another wave of curious stares and fearful chattering.

"It's Ooboshi..."

"Is it true he started dating Otoi?"

"I've heard it is, yeah. Apparently he was leading a group of Krimzon grunts to school this morning."

"I always thought he was weird after he stood up against a bunch of delinquents, but I never thought he'd end up as Otoi's boyfriend. No wonder he didn't back down."

"Remember how Otoi went after those guys after they hit him? This explains why."

"Damn, that's scary. Probably best not to get too close to him."

Maybe if these guys kept their voices down a bit, I wouldn't hear them so clearly. And if I really *were* the terrifying delinquent they claimed I was, they'd all be getting a public dressing down right about now, followed by a little "talk" behind the gym after school. I bet Sasori the Scorpion would actually have done it—if I'd let her.

Ozu was already at his desk when I sat down. "I heard you and Otoi-san are all over each other. How far've you gone?" There was amusement in his tone.

"I already told you everything. Why are *you* on my case too?"

"It's just funny to see you looking so uncomfortable."

"I think they call that *schadenfreude*, jerk." I scowled as I opened up my bag and got out the books I needed for first period.

Ozu always had such a robotic personality, but lately I'd been

catching glimpses of real emotion—usually because I was dealing with some kind of trouble, which I didn't exactly approve of. Still, it might have been that seeing me flounder like this sparked his curiosity. Like I was a test subject in his experiments or something.

"You're a weirdo too, Aki."

"Where's this coming from?"

"You wanted to get closer to Krimzon so Iroha doesn't join, right?"

"Yeah?"

"But now you're a member yourself. It's actually pretty funny. Like when the antivirus program you download is actually a trojan."

"Trust you to come up with an IT-related example."

"It totally fits, though, right?"

"I mean, I can't argue with that..."

It was pretty funny when you thought about it. If they made a movie about the past few days of my life, it'd definitely be a comedy. Ha ha ha. Please laugh. It'd make me feel better about the whole thing.

At the very least, I was confident all of this wasn't for nothing.

"Sometimes you gotta join 'em before you can beat 'em." I said.

"Hm? What d'you mean by that?" Ozu asked.

"I'm saying there are certain things you can't achieve without exposing yourself to a little danger."

"Ah, like examining a black box to untangle the spaghetti code."

"Y'know, I kinda feel like having to make every explanation IT-related before you understand it actually makes you come off dumber."

"Yeah, that's fair." Ozu shrugged, as though he didn't see it as a problem.

He really needed to expand his vocabulary. I was already his friend and used to putting up with it, but if he spoke like that to someone who was just trying to make conversation, he'd end up creeping them out.

If only there were a way to improve Ozu's conversational skills...but I could worry about that later. My priority right now was to keep Iroha from joining Krimzon. It would all go down after school today. I'd stick close to them, dig up evidence of their wrongdoing, present it to Iroha, and have her give up on them altogether.

Until then, it was just a matter of lying low at school.

Unfortunately, it didn't look like that was going to be easy.

"Sup, Ooboshi, uh, boyfriend. Lookin' forward to another day of love."

My plans were instantly ruined by Otoi, who for some reason had decided to come to school today.

Why was it that none of my plans could go off without a hitch

lately?

Rather than offer any meals, my junior high school expected students to bring their own lunches. The teachers generally wanted us to eat at our desks, but kids our age valued freedom, making that rule impossible to enforce.

There were a certain number of students who just ate wherever they wanted. Some wandered to other classrooms to eat with friends or lovers, while others sought quiet corners of the school. Being able to spend your lunchtime freely was one of the exciting things about moving up to junior high school from elementary.

I might have even felt a little superior compared to students in other areas, scummy as it was. School meals meant having kids set their own places, among other restrictions. But I got so used to lunch boxes being the norm, I quickly forgot all about how they might do things in other schools.

Freedom to eat wherever we wanted. What could possibly go wrong?

“Boyfriend. Let’s go eat lunch.”

“Wanna stop calling me ‘boyfriend’ so loudly in the middle of the classroom?”

Otoi laughed. “Y’blushin’? That’s adorable.”

“Actually, it’s a matter of attracting too much attention, and—y’know what, let’s just go already!” Unable to bear the stares of our classmates for any longer, I snatched up my lunch box and plastic bottle in one hand and grabbed Otoi’s hand with the other before dragging her out of the room at breakneck speed. I could hear the whispers of girls behind us remarking that the rumors about us dating had to be true, because we were holding hands.

Even out in the hallway, the curious stares didn’t stop. Otoi was too infamous; people spotted her at once.

Ugh. I guess there’s only one place left for us to go, I thought to myself, leading Otoi up the stairs.

The roof.

Nowadays, a lot of schools block access to the roof completely for safety purposes and to prevent students from jumping, but our school was an exception. The door to the roof itself was probably locked, but the space at the top of the stairs in front of the door was usually unoccupied.

Purposely seeking out a spot without air conditioning in the middle of summer was practically suicidal, but right now we had bigger problems to worry about. In fact, it was a perfect hiding spot; no normal student would ever dream of eating somewhere so hot and

stuffy, so we weren't even at risk of anybody wandering past us.

It was so *nice* not having anyone around. I let out a relieved sigh at being able to relax at last, before turning my narrowed gaze on Otoi. "What's the big deal, then?"

"Lovers are s'posed to eat lunch together, right? I think it's romantic or somethin'."

"We don't really have to go this far, do we? Just 'cause we're a couple doesn't mean we have to eat together too. You weren't even coming to school till yesterday."

"Yeah, 'bout that. Weren't there those guys causin' you and Kohinata trouble?"

"Yeah, so?" I asked.

"Seems they're not convinced a delinquent like me would wanna date a 'loser' like you. Apparently they've been askin' questions all over the place. Maybe they're lookin' t'see if they can get some dirt on me or somethin'. I dunno."

"Oh, right. So you're doing this to make it look like we're actually dating?"

"Yup. They can't complain if we're all over each other at school, right?" Otoi said.

"This seems kinda over the top to me, though. You're delinquents, aren't you? Why not just fight it out?"

"Nah, we're pacifists. I don't wanna get violent over this."

"Pacifist delinquents?"

Ah. That would explain why she scolded those kids the way she did for beating me up. And why the only rebellious thing I'd witnessed Krimzon do over these past few days was skip school. I hadn't seen a hint of violence, blackmail, reckless driving, underage drinking, or smoking. I'd definitely heard *threats* from some of them, but I was starting to think that was just a matter of bad manners, rather than anything else.

"Otoi..." I began. "Is Krimzon..."

Before I could finish, there was the rumbling of a stomach—from none other than the girl in front of me.

"Oh, er..." she mumbled.

How was I supposed to react to that? Would it be more gentlemanly if I pretended I hadn't heard anything? Or would it make her feel better if I teased her about it; made her laugh?

It was no use. I didn't have enough experience with girls to figure this one out.

"Ha ha. I'm starvin'. Could y'unwrap my lunch box? I can't be bothered."

"You're not even embarrassed?!"

And she wanted *me* to unwrap her lunch box? It'd be way quicker

just to do it herself! Did her laziness know no bounds?!

Of course, I was such a devoted boyfriend that I unwrapped her lunch box without question.

“Whoa...”

Her lunch box had a fancy, traditional checked pattern, its surface covered with a smooth lacquer. You could tell it was of high quality, but at the same time it wasn't showy. It had a very genuine air of luxury about it. It even gave off a refined, woody fragrance.

“Could y'get the lid off too?”

“Seriously?” I complained, but pulled off the lid anyway. My eyes widened. “This...is your *lunch*?!”

Thick slices of rolled omelet, deep-fried sea lettuce, pickled radish, boiled shrimp still in their shells, smoked duck, and even grilled perch. It was a selection of the slightly fancy dishes your parents buy when there's something to celebrate. That the rice was the only simple part, garnished with nothing but sesame seeds and a pickled plum, made it all the more fancy.

“Your lunch is way too fancy for a delinquent,” I said.

“I didn't make it myself.”

“Your family must be crazy rich.”

Which begged the question: if Otoi was born into such a well-to-do family, why did she feel the need to rebel?

I tried to pass the lunch box to her then, but she made no move to take it from me. She just stared at me, looking me right in the eye.

“What?” I asked.

“Aah...” She opened her mouth.

Was she *actually* serious? I'd unwrapped and opened her lunch box, and now she wanted me to feed her on top of all of that? *And* she thought I'd have the balls to actually do something so embarrassing?!

“Aah...” she vocalized again.

“C'mon, at least feed yourself.”

Otoi hesitated. “Oh. I just heard that's what boyfriends did.”

“Why d'you look so disappointed?”

She looked genuinely downcast—something I'd never seen from Otoi before. I don't know if she caught me off guard or what, but she was doing a great job at making me feel weirdly guilty!

But wasn't feeding yourself just common sense? Getting someone else to do it was just lazy, and it'd make her look bad. So why was she looking at me like that?! It was enough to make me think *I* was a literal villain for not indulging her!

They say that succubi inspire human passion and feed on lust. So, if Otoi was trying to inspire a sense of protectiveness in me and feed on laziness... What sort of demon was she?

For a second, everything was silent. Then...

“Aah...”

“Nrrgh... Be still! Be still, right hand of mine!”

Like it was being controlled by a powerful darkness, my right hand was taking out the (again, checkered) chopsticks from their plastic container, trembling as it went. It was completely out of my control now as it used them to pick up some food from Otoi’s lunch and bring it slowly to her mouth.

“Aumngh.”

“Gaaah! I actually did it! What the heck am I doing?!”

Stupid arm! Stupid biceps! What’s gotten into you guys?! I writhed as I blasted my arm for giving in to temptation.

“What’sa matter? Where’s the next one?”

“Here, have some omelet! Look how yellow and fluffy it is! Doesn’t it look good?”

“Aumngh... Yeah, ’spretty good. I’ll have another bite.”

I’d thrown the piece of omelet into her mouth out of pure desperation, but she *still* wasn’t satisfied and parted her lips again.

It felt like I was feeding a baby bird—that probably makes the whole situation seem cute, but it really did feel like I was taking care of her in some way. Whichever way you want to describe it, I couldn’t deny the guilty thrill I got from feeding a girl the same age as me.



I ended up feeding her like that until her entire lunch box was empty. Satisfied, Otoi patted at her belly contentedly, and then spoke again before I even had the time to get started on my own lunch.

“Snice t’have a boyfriend. Makes life easier.”

“Pretty sure all of this borders on domestic violence.”

“Really? I thought y’were enjoyin’ it. Am I wrong?”

“No...and that’s what gets me most of all!”

“Swin-win then, ain’t it?” Otoi chuckled.

“Isn’t this something your henchman would do, though? Not your boyfriend. I bet you’ve made other Krimzon members feed you before, right?”

“Nah, never. Never ever.”

“Huh?”

“I’m Krimzon’s leader, right? Can’t let ’em think I’m lazy.”

“That doesn’t add up. It’s your gang—you should be able to be yourself in front of them.”

“Snot how it works.”

My hand paused as it went for my own food. My lunch was way simpler than Otoi’s. My parents weren’t around, so I’d made it myself. It was mostly frozen food and other stuff I’d cooked up in the microwave.

Realizing I didn’t understand, Otoi looked thoughtful for a moment before explaining, “I’m the leader, yeah, ’n’ I’ve got a certain role to play. I know it’s ‘my’ gang, but that’s exactly why I gotta think ’bout how I come across to ’em.”

“Isn’t that uncomfortable?”

“I guess. Same thing with any group, though, right? Like family; a family provides for you, so you gotta know how to act ’round ’em, and how not to act.”

“I’m gonna have to disagree with the family examp—” I cut myself off. “Y’know, I think I know what you’re talking about, actually.”

The image of my parents’ faces appeared in my mind. Their dream since their schooldays had been to expand their business into America and dress Hollywood and Broadway stars. But, having been assigned the role of “parents,” they never once shared that dream with me. They only told me about it once it had transformed from a fanciful dream into solid reality. And even then, they’d seemed really apologetic about just springing it on me.

“Nyway, as the leader of Krimzon, I gotta show dignity. ’Sfine pushin’ ’em around ’n’ all, but I can’t let any see me gettin’ fed like a spoiled sloth.”

“But I’m an exception?” I asked.

“Seems so. Since you’ve got nothin’ to do with Krimzon.”

“I don’t count as a member even though I’m your boyfriend?”

“Not really. Guess if I’m bein’ blunt, you’re more like outside assistance.”

“We’re admitting this is a really shallow relationship then, huh?”

“Doesn’t that make things easier on you, though? Y’don’t gotta take any responsibility, and I can be all lazy with you. Without you worryin’ I’m gonna kill you in your sleep, or me worryin’ I’m gonna disappoint you.” Otoi let out a dry laugh.

I had no idea how serious she was being right now. The thought that I’d get to see the side of a pretty girl that no one else knew about set my heart racing.

Oops. I needed to be careful; I needed to remember our relationship wasn’t real.

“Hey, Ooboshi. What was your first name again?”

“Akiteru. Why?”

“Akiteru... Ugh. Four whole syllables...”

“My friend Ozu just calls me Aki.”

“Much better. I’ll go with that. Aki. Aki. Aki. Yup, that’s tons easier.”

“What’s yours, then? I’ll come up with a nickname for—”

“Say *that* again.”

“Sorry. I don’t know *what* I was thinking! Forget I said anything.”

The least she could do was warn me before she added that threatening growl to her voice—if she didn’t want me to have a heart attack, at least.

She must have had bad experiences with nicknames in the past. Either that, or she just hated her first name. I remember seeing it, just once, on the class register at some point. It made use of some interesting kanji, so I didn’t know how it was read, but I remember thinking it looked pretty cool.

“First Ozu, now you...” I said, getting us back on track. “Why does everyone close to me insist on shortening my name? It’s like they’re obsessed with efficiency or something.”

Though I guess it was kind of nice to be called by a nickname. Especially by a super cute girl like Otoi.

Huh. I must have been seeing Otoi as “cute” now.

She leads a gang of delinquents, dumbass. Just ’cause you know her a little better now doesn’t make her any less dangerous!

Giving my cheek a good slap, I snatched back focus. I hardened my gaze, like a fighter recognizing his opponent’s punches hit hard in the first round, and so he’d have to raise his guard for round two—only for Otoi’s head to slump down on my shoulder, breaking my guard entirely and landing an uppercut that proved to be a fatal

knockout.

“Um, Otoi?!”

“Man, this is relaxin’... Your body’s just the right temperature, Aki.”

“Y-Y-You can’t do this! You’re a rebel! Think about Sasori the Scorpion! Wouldn’t she be mad if she saw this?! She’s always talking about how rebels shouldn’t be feminine!”

“But it feels so easy... I dunno if I care ’bout rebellin’ ’nymore. It’s ’cause of you I’m bein’ so ‘feminine.’ Guess you’ve made a woman outta me.”

“Never *ever* use that phrasing in front of Krimzon members. Okay?!”

The LIME chat had already descended into chaos once over the topic of us having ‘done it’ or not. Never again, please.

“Hey, quit movin’,” Otoi said. “My head’s gonna slip.”

I could only groan.

As she tried to adjust her position, Otoi rubbed up against my arm, creating a pleasant—*unpleasant!*—tickling sensation.

Now what? Why would we be sitting together like this if we weren’t lovers?

Her warmth just felt so *real*. I could feel it so keenly against my skin. And, I dunno if it was her shampoo, conditioner, perfume, natural scent, or what, but she smelled so sweet it turned my brain fuzzy. My heart was going so crazy it felt like I was literally going to die. How was Otoi not hearing this?

My body froze up with nerves. I could barely breathe. Annoyingly, Otoi didn’t seem perturbed in the slightest. She was a succubus without emotion, taking advantage of my innocence.

“Aki,” Otoi whispered in my ear. “D’you wanna know ’bout Krimzon?”

Suddenly, I was back to my senses. “Y-Yeah.”

Right. I was a man on a mission.

“Tag along with us after school, then. I’ll show you.”

“Show me what?”

“Show you how bad we are.”

I swallowed.

So far, everyone I’d met in Krimzon had been so nice I almost forgot it was a group of delinquents. But now, it was finally time to confront the dark rumors that ran amok on the streets. To see what this group did that was so bad. I wasn’t sure I was ready.

“Well?” Otoi pressed. “Wanna come see?”

A part of me didn’t. I’d found the good in Otoi and her group, and I was scared of the moment my perception would change when I saw them causing real, indefensible trouble. But if I was just going to turn

a blind eye to that, there was no point being here at all.

So I nodded.

“Yeah. Show me who Krimzon really are.”

There have been two recent trends in manga relating to delinquents. One: the characters look scary, but are actually soft on the inside. Two: they make it seem like they’re evil to the core, when actually they just spend their time fooling around with their friends.

“But Akiteru,” I hear you say, “that’s *fiction*.”

And yeah, I know that. But in my current position, those were the two only outcomes I could foresee, nonsensical as they were.

Please *let Krimzon just be a bunch of buddies having fun!*

I could remember saying that silent prayer when I accepted Otoi’s proposition.

“You wanna go?!”

“The hell you say to me?!”

“Kill him! Kill him!”

“Beat him up! Beat him up!”

Turns out my worst fears were confirmed...

After school, Otoi led me to the riverside. What I witnessed there was a scene of savagery, as though time had been turned back a hundred years. The delinquents gathered there were dressed in exaggerated outfits, like they too had been frozen in time. They were shouting themselves hoarse with excitement while the throaty revving of bulky mopeds dyed the summer air an apocalyptic gray.

All of that emotion was focused on a single spot.

Two guys, heads butted together as they snorted and glared at each other, ready to snap the other’s neck at a moment’s notice.

Which was stronger? Which would win? The spectators were burning to see these questions answered.

I’d stepped into an arena. There was no other way to describe it.

“You’re here too, Senpai? Who’re you bettin’ on?”

“Neither! You know betting on fights is illegal in this country, right?!”

I was sitting next to Otoi in the VIP seating—the steps down to the river. Tachibana was sitting behind us, leaning forward to speak.

“Oh, *yawn!* Don’t act like you’re not as hyped as the rest of us!”

“I’m not. Do I look like a caveman to you?”

Far from being hyped, I was fed up.

Could you really blame me, when I was hanging out with a gang full of idiots obsessed with such barbaric entertainment? I was beyond disappointed. If they liked to watch combat sports, fair enough, but adding gambling into the mix crossed the line.

“You take life way too seriously, Senpai. It’s not like we’re betting actual money.”

“Oh, that’s right. You’re betting ‘Otoi Points,’ which can be used to hire instruments and equipment from her place. That, or stuff like a basketball, or the right to use the house’s courtyard for dance practice...”

“Yup.” Tachibana nodded. “Just harmless fun, right?”

“Strictly speaking, there’s that old law against dueling. So the fight itself is also on shaky legal ground.”

“The guys who fight in these things are all hopeful professional martial artists, or guys who’ve made it their life’s purpose to train their bodies. They’re just sparring, really.”

“In a public place,” I pointed out.

“Oh my *God!* It’s never gonna be good enough for you, is it, Senpai? We’re delinquents! We’re not s’posed to follow rules. But sure, if you wanna stay a virgin your whole life, go ahead and suck the fun outta *everything*.”

“This has nothing to do with my chastity, and *I’m* not a delinquent. Also, stop clinging to me!” I had to push Tachibana back where she was leaning on me. Even if she knew my relationship with Otoi wasn’t real, she didn’t have to invade my personal space. Unless this was a case of a grunt trying to NTR her leader.

Or maybe she just wasn’t thinking about it, because she knew we weren’t really dating—and she didn’t care to think about how her actions might be perceived by the people around us.

“By the way, the guitar I’ve got right now is something I borrowed with Otoi points,” Tachibana said. “I can’t afford to lose these bets—not till I’ve got enough money saved to buy my own.”

“Your guitar belongs to Otoi?” I instinctively looked at the girl sitting next to me. And like it was the most normal thing in the world, I got a silent nod from her... “Never thought I’d see the day when girls got so invested in street fighting...”

“Hey!” Tachibana snapped. “Krimzon has rules against sexual discrimination, y’know!”

“We’re delinquents! We’re not s’posed to follow rules!” I parroted back to her.

“I don’t have to follow rules! *You* do!”

“Sounds to me like you don’t *really* care about treating people equally...”

Tachibana seemed to completely lack any sort of consideration for other people. Being around a pest like her was utterly exhausting.

There was just one thing about her that stuck with me. Tachibana was annoying like nobody else, and I’d figured that was just how she communicated with everybody. But after spending a few days with

Krimzon, I hadn't seen her tease anybody else like that. Not even once. She was as spunky, selfish, and crazy about her guitar as ever, but she wasn't annoying, and she didn't run around accusing anyone else of being a virgin or something similarly insulting.

"Is it just me, or do you treat me worse than everyone else?" I asked her.

"Do I?"

"I've never seen you tease anyone else for being a virgin, for example."

"I guess 'cause no one else gives off the same virgin vibes as you. I'm not doing it consciously or anything."

"That's something, I guess..."

Tachibana leaned in to whisper in my ear. "What exactly are you trying to say?"

Her face was so close to mine...in the same way that Otoi's had been before. Must've been a delinquent thing. It was more like she was trying to threaten me than seduce me...though yeah, I know. I'm overthinking it.

Since she was asking, though, there *was* something I wanted to say. Tachibana teased me like no one else in the group, and she seemed very comfortable getting into my personal space. I didn't know for sure what she thought of me, but there was one objective possibility that I couldn't deny.

"You should stop teasing me," I said. "Y'know, 'cause...people might get the wrong idea."

"The wrong idea? Whaddya mean?" Tachibana blinked at me.

I looked away from her. "They might think you...like me, or something. Even though I'm your leader's boyfriend."

There. I said it, even though it was ultra-embarrassing.

Tachibana looked like I'd just slapped her across the face. And then...

She burst into laughter. "You think I *like* you, just 'cause I treat you different? What are you, *five*?! Oh, I know! You don't know what it means for a girl to be interested in you, so you think all kinds of teasing are the same and you lose your mind over it! That's so typical!" Tachibana slapped my back repeatedly, clearly having the time of her life.

My shoulders weren't shaking because I was crying—I was just so damned pissed off. And I mean that.

"Look, I've never been in love so I dunno for sure, but I reckon *if* I liked you, I'd be all over you in a sweet, girly kinda way. Like, being nice to you and trying to act all cute. Sure, I pick on you and no one else, but if I liked you, I wouldn't pick on you *at all*, right? That's just common sense."

“You see it a lot in manga—characters teasing their crush.”

“Ew. Are you seriously getting *manga* mixed up with real life?”

I gritted my teeth. Any more of this and my psyche would shatter—because not only did she have a point; said point hit me right where it hurt.

Did Tachibana genuinely believe that draping herself over me right in front of my pretend girlfriend *wouldn't* give people the wrong impression? That would be the most logical conclusion, but as a guy, I was still sort of disappointed. My shoulders slouched.

“Y'know,” came Tachibana's seductive whisper in my ear, “you are special to me—in certain ways.”

“‘Certain ways’ being...?”

“You got *real* lucky with your parents, but you don't even realize what you got. It's so obvious just looking at you, and it pisses me off. Makes me wanna pick on you.”

“Tachibana!” I gasped, my eyebrows shooting upwards.

Parents... It was like I'd figured something out about her.

A tiny finger prodded into my cheek. “And now you're looking all serious. That's *just* what I'm talking about, Senpai.”

“Huh?”

“You hear one thing 'bout someone, then decide they *must* be unhappy, so you start feeling sorry for them. But we'll keep on going and supporting ourselves, whether anyone's worrying about us or not. Basically, it's none of your business, but you're trying to make it yours anyway.”

She'd said “we”...

Tachibana turned her attention back to the delinquents enjoying their barbaric entertainment in front of us.

“Guwaaaargh!”

“Guwuh?!”

“Did ya see that?! That uppercut was so clean!”

“His jaw's gotta be broken after that! Remember how cocky he was at the start? Yikes! Hope he knows a good plastic surgeon!”

“Gah ha ha ha!”

It was the same violent scene as before: one that disgraced our good constitutional nation of Japan. The guys had collapsed to the floor, their bruised faces covered in blood. My own face seemed to sting just from looking at them.

But the fact remained that both of them had agreed to be here. Sure, fighting was wrong—a crime, even—yet they were doing it as a part of their delinquent culture, and they didn't get any innocent people involved, so it couldn't be *that* bad.

Right?

Honestly, I wasn't sure. I was too close to these guys now and

didn't trust myself to give an objective answer anymore. The only thing I could tell you was that this was the world of the fallen.

"You gotta be kidding me..."

"Wh-What's the matter, Senpai? You wanna fight? Is that why you're glaring at me?"

"I'm just a regular guy. I don't care about your 'rules' or whatever. And Ozu's sister isn't like you either. You've got no right to get her involved with your crappy gang!"

I'd made up my mind, and I glared at Tachibana as I presented her with my decision.

They thought everything was totally fine as long as they kept themselves separate in their own little world—and I agreed. If they kept their business confined to delinquents, I didn't care what they did.

But that wasn't what was happening here. Tachibana was trying to turn Ozu's sister into one of them. Krimzon were delinquents, plain and simple. And no matter what excuses they had, the stuff they did was wrong.

There was no way I could accept this.

"Why d'you wanna stop Iroha joining so bad?" Tachibana said. "Who even is she to you?"

"She's my friend's sister."

"So, nothing then?"

"It's not just any friend I'm talking about. I think he might actually be my best friend. And Iroha's his sister," I told her plainly, my voice unwavering.

I was perfectly aware that my relationship with Iroha was insubstantial at best—if we had one at all. I didn't know what she was like. I didn't know her favorite food. I didn't know what made her laugh, scowl, or cry. She was practically a stranger to me.

But I *did* know I was drawn to Ozu's genius. I couldn't help but feel that I wanted to do something—anything—to create an environment where those talents could thrive. Because it was clear that the classroom wasn't it.

Was I being egotistical? Absolutely, so laugh away. Was I really as lucky in life as Tachibana claimed, without even realizing it? Maybe, but so what? If this was meddling, then let me meddle. As far as this business was concerned, my nose was going all the way in.

"You guys live however you want, right, supporting yourselves?" I said. "Well, I'm just living my life how I want it too. How does that make you any different from me?"

Tachibana clenched her teeth and glared; apparently she couldn't come up with an answer. The light in her eyes seemed to sharpen, and emotion started to swell within them.

“Kay. ‘Senough now.” Otoi stepped in between us before the situation could reach a boiling point. Until now, she hadn’t made a sound. “Come with me a sec, Aki.”

“What d’you want? I’m still talking to Tachi— Ow! Ow!”

“Don’t squirm if y’don’t wanna suffocate.”

“W-Wait! Gah!”

With a strength that didn’t match her mind-numbing drawl in the slightest, Otoi put me in a headlock and started dragging me up the steps away from the river.

“Where’re you going, Otoi-san?” one of her followers shouted. “Things are just heating up over here!”

“Me ’n’ the boyfriend need some special time together. Asagi can sort you guys out with the prizes and exchanges once the fight’s over, yeah?”

“Got it! ...Dang, wish I was getting some alone time with Otoi-san...”

Envious stares rained down on me as I was pulled away by the neck. It must have been nice being so innocent they had time to feel jealous.

Well, maybe their jealousy was a little justified: Otoi’s chest, which was not small by any means, kept squishing up against the side of my face.

Ow!

The pain around my neck was a warning to be rid of my worldly desires.

Forgive me, Lord, for I have sinned...

The sky was turning crimson. Away from the riverbank, Otoi and I walked the lonely streets together. She’d let go of my neck around the time we stopped being able to hear the delinquents’ cheers, and now the pain from the headlock and the euphoria from her chest existed only as a not-so-distant memory.

Otoi and I weren’t walking as closely as lovers should. Instead, we kept our distance the same as you’d find between classmates; enough for another person to fit between us.

It was peaceful out here, away from the sounds of engines and angry shouts. As natural as it was, it felt like ages since I’d experienced quiet like this, making it feel more valuable than it normally would.

“What did y’think of the fightin’ back there?” Otoi asked, breaking the silence that had built up.

She’d barely spoken this entire time, and her question caught me completely off guard. My response was bland—maybe even insensitive

—as a result.

“I stick by what I said to Tachibana. Fighting, gambling, and other bad stuff like that can’t be justified no matter the reason behind it. You’re breaking the law.”

“Too right.” Otoi pointed a finger at me and laughed.

Why the heck was she laughing? I didn’t recall putting on a clown suit this morning.

“Quit talking like you’re not involved. You’re their *leader*, Otoi.”

“Sall fake.”

“...Come again?”

She didn’t...actually say what I thought she had, right? Her reply was so unexpected, I seemed to have missed it altogether. I *thought* she said something about it being fake, but that had to be my imagination.

“They all think they’re bettin’ on the fight, but effectively they’re bettin’ nothin’,” Otoi said.

“Nothing... The fighting is real, though, right?”

“Did y’notice that there were rebels besides Krimzon members out there?”

“Y-Yeah. There were more people than usual, and I kinda assumed they gathered from other teams or something.”

“Truth is, those extras were paid to be there.”

“What? Does that include *all* the people out there who aren’t in Krimzon?”

“Sure does. Bettin’ on a fight like that feels way more ‘bad’ the more people are around, right? The guys *love* that kinda thing. The extras, though, they aren’t bettin’ on anythin’—so the Krimzon kids are guaranteed to win. ‘N’ the guys fightin’ can go as ham as they want till the winnin’ blow, which’ll always go to us ‘cause those are the orders I’m givin’. ‘Slike pro wrestlin’, really.”

“What about the Otoi Points, then?”

“The only guys earnin’ any Otoi Points in Krimzon are the ones who’ve got somethin’ they wanna do. My supply of instruments ‘n’ stuff ain’t endless, after all. If every last one of those guys were bettin’ seriously, you’d get some who’d never get a chance to borrow anythin’ at all. The bad feelings would all build up till they started causin’ some *real* trouble.”

“Hold on a sec. I need some time to process this.” I put my hand to my head, not ready to let her continue until I could chase off this headache.

What exactly was Otoi saying here?

The barbaric scene I’d just witnessed was all fake? No... She was just saying that to get me off her case about it. However, all the details she gave me were straightforward enough—there was no complex information clogging up her story. If nothing else, what she

was telling me was rehearsed; if she *was* lying, it was a lie with a lot of thought put into it.

But I wasn't simpleminded enough to swallow her story just because she performed it well. I liked to think I was levelheaded enough not to be recruited into a cult or misled by a wacky seminar, and this was no different.

"I can't see what you get out of all of that," I said. "Putting on events so that you can lend out your possessions for free—what's the point?"

"Your answer's right here."

"Here'... Huh?"

Otoi stopped walking and jerked her chin ahead of us.

I thought we'd been walking and talking without a destination in mind, but it seemed that wasn't the case.

"These apartments... Public housing?"

"You got it." Otoi gave me a small round of applause.

Several five-story apartment buildings stretched out next to each other on the plot, which was surrounded by a hedge. Though it was already evening, futons had been left drying on the balconies, a sign that there was life inside those apartments. The sight somehow made me homesick—even though I didn't really have an old home to miss. Young children ran around outside, playing on the creaking metal swing sets in the courtyard.

"I used to come over 'n' play with friends who lived here when I was in elementary school," Otoi said.

"I see." I wasn't all that interested. Who *didn't* play with other children when they were younger?

"Think there's nothin' special 'bout that? Think again."

"If the kids here went to the nearby elementary school, then of course you'd cross paths."

"I didn't, though. I went to a private school for elementary," Otoi continued. "None of the kids who lived here went to my school."

"Huh? How come you played with them, then?"

"My school was pretty outta the way, 'n' none of my friends there lived this far out. Didn't have 'nyone to play with when I got home. But when I played by myself, the kids from here'd sometimes come join me."

"Oh, right. So— Wait." Something didn't add up. "If your elementary school was private, how come you're now in a public junior high? It makes sense going private *from* public, but I don't think I've heard of the reverse happening."

"I wanted to go to the same school as a friend. Begged my parents..."

"Ah..."

Hadn't I done something similar? Putting my friendship with Ozu ahead of my parents when they went to the USA. I didn't take Otoi to be that sentimental.

"Now, though, I'm kinda regrettin' endin' up in the same school as my friend," Otoi said.

"How come?"

"He got in trouble almost soon as classes started. Ended up in a reform school."

"Wha... You're kidding. I never heard about anyone like that."

"Officially, he 'transferred.' Some of the sharper kids picked up on what was goin' on and spread rumors, but I'm guessin' they never made their way to you. Seein' as y'never had any friends 'n' all."

"Ngh... I guess being a loner, you miss out on a lotta info...on top of everything else."

Society was hard enough on its lonelier members without that. Great, I made myself depressed.

"His crime was theft," Otoi continued. "At first, he was on probation, but then he kept doin' it. They figured he wasn't sorry at all, and he got sent right to that institute. It was pretty tough on me when I found out, 'cause I never in a million years thought he'd do that kinda thing. I actually barfed a little."

"But now you can laugh about it?" I asked, seeing the small smile on her lips.

"Sall in the past, right? Kinda chilled me out too, like, nothin' really fazes me at this point." Otoi chuckled dryly. It made sense now why she was much mellower than our peers. "Not that I'd wanna go through all that again. But it did teach me to pick up on stuff I wouldn't have before. Like, I didn't know till then these apartments were home to a famous delinquent. An' he'd had a bad influence on these kids who were only a tiny bit naughty to start with."

"A famous delinquent?"

"Yup. He was like some bandit outta a fantasy novel, apparently. Stole anythin' he wanted, hit anyone he wanted to, did whatever he wanted to the girls who were attracted to him. Definitely left his mark on the younger kids too."

"I can't believe a guy like that actually exists," I said.

"Apparently there's quite a lotta people who end up like that—if we take every rumor at face value. 'Nyway, at some point he ended up gettin' kicked out—now I dunno where he is or what he's doin'. Heard he's either part of some pack of thugs in the city, or he outright joined the yakuza. Again, rumors."

"It'd make sense that's where he ended up, though. Assuming he really was *that* bad."

"He might've been gone after that," Otoi continued, "but it seems

the mentality he planted stuck around. The kids around our age—'specially the ones with problems at home or wherever—were really strongly influenced by him, and were more likely to end up as delinquents themselves. Not sayin' it's justified, just 'cause there was a bad influence about, but I do think, like... I didn't exactly have the best judgment back then... It woulda been pretty easy for me to think they were right—think they were happy breakin' all the rules—and gone to join them, y'know?"

Otoi's explanation planted this thought in my mind: *That's exactly what's happening to Kohinata Iroha...*

"Everyone's reason is different," she went on. "Maybe their family isn't the richest, or their parents are a little too strict. Means they struggle to get what they want. To do what they wanna do. Eat what they wanna eat. Go where they wanna go. After all that, they find they gotta give up on whatever dreams they got too. Mosta that stuff sounds kinda minor, right, but it all adds up to make a huge difference. It gets to the point they're goin' through life, then they look at everyone around 'em and feel this kinda...wall, separatin' 'em from everyone else. Like an actual, physical thing. Whaddya think they do then?"

"They try to make things right," I replied. "Close that gap between them and the rest of the world. Insist they're just like the people they see around them."

"Yeah. 'N' it'd be so easy, if only there were a direct way of goin' about it. Like, if they could just beg their parents to give 'em a higher allowance, they'd be all set."

"But life isn't that easy..."

"Sure ain't. So their only option is to be a bit more heavy-handed 'bout closin' that gap... See what I'm sayin'?"

"That's not an excuse for doing bad stuff," I said. "There are plenty of people out there forced to compromise, but who still live their life on the straight and narrow."

"All that proves is that those people are 'specially impressive. Personally, I don't like to get on my high horse and blame anyone for turnin' to rebellion—still not tryin' to justify it," Otoi said. "But that's why I made a place for those kids to vent. Somewhere safe they can get it all outta their system, so they don't stray from the path like my old friend or those kids under a bad influence. Krimzon is a group that lets 'em feel like delinquents till they find somethin' else they're interested in, 'n' are ready to lead a decent life."

"Wait, does that mean Tachibana, Downtown Asakusa Metal, and all the other members—"

"Yeah. They all live around here, 'n' have all been subject to some real bad influences."

I was rendered speechless. The scope of what Otoi was telling me was so incredible, that anything I could say just seemed shallow to me. I couldn't believe Tachibana had accused *me* of sticking my nose into other people's business—when the leader she respected so much was the queen of all meddling.

"That fake fighting thing you pulled. Is that also a part of all this?" I asked.

"You got it. Just offerin' to lend my instruments 'n' stuff to those guys wouldn't make 'em happy—'n' they wouldn't take me up on it. The most important thing is for them to feel like they've earned somethin'. 'Snothin' more humiliatin' than receiving someone's charity."

Otoi was drawing these children in to protect them like a mother. I was willing to bet if they ever found out the truth, though, they'd get mad and lose all their loyalty to her. Some of them might even turn on her completely.

On the other hand, once you kept a lie hidden for long enough, it transformed into truth. All those kids were deep into Otoi's scheme at this point. You could almost say it was the perfect crime, if only the intentions behind it weren't so pure.

She went on. "I don't want any of 'em doin' anythin' they can't take back, 'n' I couldn't stand seein' 'em give up on their dreams either just 'cause of the family they were born into. I know this all just sums up to me bein' arrogant. I just wanna give any help I can."

"Their dreams... Hey, are you talking about music?!"

"Swing and a hit."

"That's not a phrase. You just reversed 'swing and a miss.'"

Otoi chuckled. "Y'always respond so seriously to that kinda stuff."

"And that's why they were practicing music at your place, right?"

"That's it. I'd prefer if they had somewhere they could go all out without botherin' anyone—but that'd be kinda tough to arrange. It's just about okay if they practice durin' the day, so that's what we've gone with. Does mean I gotta skip school most days, though."

"You're even sacrificing your attendance for these guys?"

She really was going all out. I thought I was bad about sticking my nose in other people's business, but Otoi was on a whole other level.

As we spoke, we walked in the direction of the apartment complex's empty parking lot. Once there, Otoi sat down on the curb in front of one of the free spaces.

"You can't sit there," I said. "What if someone wants to park?"

"I'll move. Y'really gotta make a big deal outta everythin'?"

Sure, she *could* just move. Didn't mean it was fine for her to act like she owned the place. She hadn't even put down a cloth or

anything to stop her skirt getting dirty. There was doing whatever you wanted, and then there was being impractical.

I shot her a quick glance out of the corner of my eye, silently contemplating. When I stopped talking, so did Otoi. I heard the rustling of something being unwrapped—probably a Suckie. I guess she was bored.

I now knew who exactly Otoi and Krimzon were. If you asked me to classify them as good or bad, I'd have to go with the latter—but at least there seemed to be an orderliness to their badness.

What did that mean for me? Was I free to leave Ozu's sister to her own devices?

The answer was no.

"Tachibana doesn't know, does she?" I asked.

"Hm?"

"She doesn't know you're pulling the strings behind the scenes. And for that matter, no one else knows the truth either, right?"

"Nah, I guess not," Otoi replied.

"Meaning Tachibana thinks she's genuinely rebelling."

"That'd make sense."

"As far as she's concerned, this is an actual delinquent gang—and *that's* what she's inviting Ozu's sister to join."

"I guess so," Otoi said. "That's why I went to the trouble of checkin' what Kohinata Iroha is to you guys."

I thought back to when we spoke to Otoi behind the gym. Back then, I had no clue who she was or what she wanted—so her questions had me a bit blindsided. Now that I knew what she was fishing for though, there was something I *could* tell her, even if I didn't know anything about Iroha herself.

"If nothing else, I know that Iroha's never been influenced by anyone really bad. I don't think her family's so badly off she'd be prevented from doing something she wanted to either."

"How can y'be so sure?"

"I live in the same apartment building as her. Never heard any rumors about her being a troublemaker, and I can only imagine the rent on her place is more or less the same as mine."

Otoi took the Suckie from her mouth with a *pop* and held it up, waving the stick in the air like she was drawing a picture. "I see."

Was that a habit of hers when she was thinking about something? Otoi was completely silent as she stared at the glossy surface of the candy.

The reality of the situation was that the Kohinata family had to be *at least* middle class, if not wealthy. I'd been pretty surprised myself when I had the conversation with my parents about the rent and my monthly living expenses after they went abroad. I had always lived in

that apartment like it was no big deal, but the number of rooms, the space, and the location all came together to make it a pricey place to live.

In terms of my parents, they had a business successful enough for them to expand to the States. Not to mention we were related to the CEO of a major entertainment company. My family's wealth was reflected in our choice of home.

Then there was Ozu's place, with its refined, luxurious feel. The lack of a TV suggested his family liked to live simply, but there were no signs there they were struggling financially at all. And even Iroha herself, though she'd been rude to me, didn't seem to have grown up neglected in any way.

"Isn't there anythin' weird 'bout their apartment?" Otoi asked.

"Weird?" I considered the question. One possible answer sprang to mind immediately. "I guess that they don't have a TV. Though I dunno if that's so 'weird' these days, when you can do everything on your phone."

"TV? If that's so, Asagi might've been tellin' the truth."

"Why, what did she say?"

"See, I asked her why she wanted to invite a girl like Kohinata Iroha to join Krimzon. Accordin' to Asagi, she never gets to do anythin' fun and spends her days bored outta her mind."

"She never has...fun?" I asked.

"I was wonderin' if it was the same situation as with Asagi—that her family wasn't rich enough to buy her stuff, so I asked."

"It can't be that for all the reasons I just said."

"Right. So I figured there's somethin' else puttin' stress on her that's got nothin' to do with money."

"Stress..."

"Like, she's not *allowed* access to entertainment or somethin'."

"Ozu's got a PC. And like I said, with a smartphone, you can access all sorts of entertainment."

"Doesn't change the fact that, from what I hear, Kohinata Iroha's dyin' of boredom."

"So she's bored," I said. "Does that mean you're gonna let her join your gang?"

"If she's got nowhere to belong. If leavin' her alone'd make her turn to delinquency. Then I'd accept her, I guess."

"I see..."

It was clear to me there was some real conviction behind her usual drawl. Otoi was a leader—and someone I felt I could trust. If Iroha really did join Krimzon, I doubted there was a risk of her screwing her life up with crime.

I asked myself that same question: was it okay for me to leave her

to her own devices, then?

Again.

The answer was no.

If there were an ironclad guarantee that Iroha wouldn't get wrapped up in any trouble, maybe the answer would be yes. But that guarantee didn't exist.

"You're the only one who knows what's truly going on in that group, Otoi," I said. "As far as any outsider's concerned, Krimzon's just a bunch of rebels."

"So?"

"The group gets judged on how it presents itself to the outside world. Not on the truth."

It was just like how Ozu was an outcast in our class. Being labeled a delinquent could only result in being rejected by society. I'd seen how Otoi was treated when she showed up at school, hadn't I? It was the opposite of how Ozu and I were regarded—as weaklings.

People looked at her with admiration, because she was strong. That was how it seemed at first glance. But no matter the contrasting emotions in those stares, the conclusions of our classmates were the same:

They get picked on.

Something about them is scary.

I'm going to stay away from them.

Did I want my friend's little sister living a life where people said those kinds of things about her?

I heard a chuckle from beside me and asked, a little indignantly, "What?"

"Nothin'. I was just thinkin' how you 'n' me are pretty similar."

"I hate violence. I'm not really interested in music, and I don't know anything about it in the first place."

"I meant personalitywise. Like, you're lookin' super frustrated right now. That face means y'hate bein' looked down on, right?"

"I'm not gonna deny that," I said. "Though I couldn't tell you *who* exactly's looking down on me at the moment."

Maybe the gods themselves—or someone along those lines.

First, there was our class's inability to accept Ozu. Then, there was the fact that Krimzon's members could never be redeemed without falling into "delinquency." Finally, there was my powerlessness—my inability to come up with a better solution for them.

It *did* feel like someone was scorning me for all of that; laughing at me, even.

"I don't want to just let things continue as they are."

Who was I, to say something like that?

Nobody. But it was how I really felt. Probably out of stubbornness.

“I’m guessing having them join this delinquent group isn’t your first choice for saving the Krimzon kids, right, Otoi?”

“Not really. ‘N’ I don’t think it’ll be able to last once we’re outta junior high.”

“I hear you. In that case, I’m gonna think of a way out of this. For Krimzon, and for Iroha.”

For a split second, I could have sworn I saw a smile flash across Otoi’s face...but maybe I was just seeing things. She was already back to her usual poker face by the time she was talking again.

“I’m not gonna get my hopes up, ‘kay?”

“Okay.”

That was more than fine by me. I only made such a bold declaration to her to keep myself accountable. The truth was I hadn’t come up with anything yet.

I was a man with no plan. Now, how pathetic was that?

“You fed her in a secluded stairwell... She rested on your shoulder... You got to know each other by an apartment complex at twilight, and formed a connection... Blub, blub, blub...”

“Is that *foam* coming outta your mouth?! M-Mashiro?! Earth to Mashiro!”

“Otoi-san’s done way more fake-girlfriendly things with you than I ever have... It makes no sense. Why the difference? Is it my sense of pride? The different circumstances?”

“Y’know, I did *try* to do coupley things with you at the start. It’s just, you spurned me at every turn...”

“I-I did, didn’t I? It was my fault... Uuugh... If only I could turn back time...”

“Well, you can’t. Unless you’ve developed that ability literally just now—in which case this is now a science-fiction series.”

“Maybe I have. Maybe if I die, we’ll leap backwards in time. That’s a thing, right? I’m pretty sure there’s a light novel about that. I’m smart, so I know!”

“Calm down! This is real life! There’s no time travel, and there’s no reincarnating into another world, even if you die!”

“Has anyone ever actually *proved* that, though? You can’t tell me it’s impossible without proof.”

“Probably because no one’s crazy enough to take the risk—and I hope that includes you!”

“I don’t wanna hear this anymore. I’m getting off. I’m done with this Ferris wheel.”

“You can’t right now—we’ve just started on the way up again.”

“...”

“You seriously haven’t been paying attention, have you?”

Chapter 4: I Have It In for My Friend's Little Sister's Friend!

It was Saturday, a few days after I had made my confident declaration to Otoi.

I had very little to show for those few days. I'd come up with no fewer than zero ideas on how to stop Iroha following the path of delinquency, and just as many for breaking up Krimzon and shepherding its members back to the light.

While I didn't have a solution to those specific problems, what I *did* have was "The Ultimate Plan"—something that had taken me exactly three days and three nights of thinking to come up with.

"So, you tell me. What's it gonna take for you to get back on the straight and narrow?"

"You really don't waste any time, huh?!"

I was standing by the entrance to the apartment complex Otoi had shown me to, and it was now the afternoon. I'd been staking the place out since the morning, and it was only now that Tachibana Asagi had appeared with a guitar case on her back.

Her first response to my question was dripping with sarcasm. *If* she was surprised, she didn't let it show, which was the glacé cherry on top.

"Also, d'you have any idea how super *gross* it is to camp outside a girl's place?"

"Now *that*, you don't have to worry about. You're too damn annoying for me to be interested in *that* way."

"You're full of crap, y'know that?" Tachibana shot back. "I guess you've totally forgotten Otoi-san had to drag you away at the river? 'Cause that's the only way it makes sense for you to come out here and talk to me with a straight face."

"You're gonna give up on getting Kohinata Iroha to join Krimzon. And I don't mind embarrassing myself like this to make it happen."

"Yeesh... You're pretty obsessed over something that's got literally nothing to do with you. You in love with Iroha or something?"

"Not in the least," I said. "And this *is* to do with me—she's my friend's little sister, and I'm her brother's friend."

"Exactly. It's got nothing to do with you."

"I admit I'm not *directly* involved, but still. Look, you've got two choices here. Either you quit being a delinquent and stay friends with

her, or you can stay in Krimzon and give up on her. If there's anything you want in exchange for leaving the gang, or if there are any conditions that need to be fulfilled, just let me know. I'll think about how we can make it happen."

"Um, what? I literally have no clue what you're talking about," Tachibana said, question marks popping off above her head.

I knew I was being heavy-handed, but I didn't have a choice. I needed her to agree with me here.

"Look, I've got some busking to do, okay? I don't have time to put up with you right now."

"No worries—I thought you might say that, and I've come prepared." I grinned and presented her with the item in my hands: a kingly sword. Also known as a penlight.

"Huh?!"

I even had a headband with "Asagi-chan" and a ton of hearts embroidered on it. I made that one myself. Oh, *and* I had a few sports drinks too. You know, to prevent heatstroke.

"Everything I could ever need is in this backpack," I said. "This fanboy is ready to go."

"No way. Are you planning to come see me perform?!"

"Of course I am. I'm gonna stick by you the whole day and make sure we don't miss our opportunity to talk."

"Help! Help, I've got a stalker over here!" Tachibana cried. "You seriously go through with this, and I'm calling the cops!"

"*You* wanna get help from the police?"

My provocative comeback made Tachibana flinch. Yup. I knew that one would hurt. I was talking to a proud rebel, after all; someone who'd rejected fair society and chosen to walk the path of darkness.

"Kinda lame to rely on the cops only when it suits you."

"Hnngh..." Tachibana's lips were trembling with frustration.

Any random rebel who wasn't serious about their lifestyle wouldn't care about playing the victim and calling the police if needed. Tachibana, on the other hand, was a diehard delinquent. One with as much pride in her ways as any underworld criminal. And right now, that was proving to be to my advantage.

"Fine! Do whatever you want."

"Heh. You don't have to tell me."

Victory was mine.

Well, so far. The fight had only just begun, after all—and it was a war of attrition.

I was aware that this would get me on her bad side, but the plan was already set. I would wear Tachibana down until I found out what she and Iroha really wanted. That information should then be enough to show a way out of this situation, or to spark some sort of idea. Not

that I had any proof of that!

“Wait, Tachibana. What are you doing?”

“Gettin’ on my bike. So?” Tachibana had been unlocking her bicycle, one with customized handlebars, but then she paused and cocked her head at me.

Bike.

Yeah... Her bike...

That one, simple word was enough to make a bead of sweat slide down my temple. I just remembered it was summer.

“Oh.” Tachibana seemed to have picked up on the reason behind my strange reaction.

That’s right: I *walked* here.

Tachibana’s mouth spread into a mocking grin. “Oooh, *right*. I get it.”

“So anyway, did you know that there’s actually a speed limit for bicycles?”

“Thirty kilometers an hour’s all I need to shake off an uber-creep like you! Smell ya later!”

“H-Hey, wait! At least count down before just riding off like that!”

I might as well not have said anything. She’d already started pedaling at full speed the moment she was out of the starting gate.

I started to sprint after her. Dammit, all this random crap in my backpack was weighing me down! Who put all that stuff in there anyway?!

“Ha ha ha! Good luck catching up to me now! Guess you shouldn’t have tried to stalk me, dumbass!”

“Shut *up*! Quit making fun of me! Just ‘cause you’re on a bike, doesn’t mean I’m about to give up!”

Her bike versus my legs.

It was a battle without honor or humanity, but to cut a long story short, I won.

“Whew... Haah... Whew... Haah... I’m...so...dead...”

That said, my victory did not come about without an enormous sacrifice.

There was a decently sized monument in front of the station: the perfect spot for any street performer or busker to set up shop. I was there in front of it, lying on the asphalt with my limbs spread out, breathing raggedly. The hot ground was burning my back, but that was the least of my problems right now.

I was seriously screwed. Actually on the brink of death. My legs were trembling, and I could see flashing lights in my vision. Thank God I had all those sports drinks with me. Without them, I’d probably have collapsed long before making it here.

“Haah... Haah... I can’t believe you actually ran all the way here. You’re a beast, Senpai...”

A bicycle may have had wheels, but at the end of the day, it was totally reliant on the strength of the person riding it. Tachibana looked beat too, if nowhere near as exhausted as me. She was leaning her chin on the handlebars and catching her breath.

“I put all my stat bonuses into grit, that’s why,” I said.

“You seriously talking like you’re a video game character? Weirdo.”

“I don’t wanna hear a delinquent calling *me* weird.”

“Cram it. And get outta the way. I need to set up for my performance.” Tachibana got off her bike and started pushing my body over to the edge of the sidewalk with her feet.

“Guargh! Be a little gentler with me, would you?”

“A freakishly tough pervert like you should be able to take it.”

She was treating me like a piece of luggage too heavy to move by hand—but I didn’t have the energy to protest, so I ended up just letting her do it. I spotted passersby giggling at us, as though they thought this was part of her performance.

Huh. That’s weird.

I looked like a total loser right now, and these people were laughing at me. Wasn’t I supposed to be embarrassed? So how come I felt...kinda happy?

Don’t get me wrong, it wasn’t that I was suddenly waking up to some buried masochistic tendencies. It was more that these people were laughing at our antics—like Tachibana and I were entertaining them.

This situation was entirely of my own making. I was the one who had chosen to sprint after Tachibana on her bike. I was the one who allowed myself to become exhausted and collapse at the finish line. I was the one letting Tachibana kick me into place, without offering up any resistance.

I’d done it all for the sake of my goal. Their laughter wasn’t the result of me getting wrapped up in something cruel, unfair, or unwanted. That was probably why it wasn’t bothering me in any way.

Making people laugh—it was the same as letting people have fun.

It struck me then, right at that moment, that this was pretty satisfying.

I sat up cross-legged on the edge of the sidewalk, and pulled out every item I had in my backpack. First, I rehydrated my overheated body with some sports drink, then I tied the “Asagi-chan” headband around my head, and readied my penlight. Did I mention I actually had two, for dual-wielding? I was a true warrior, after all.

Mentally, I was ready to get hyped and take all the pestering

Tachibana had for me, but I held back; I'd learned my lesson from last time. I didn't want Otoi to have to call in her family doctor for me twice in such a short space of time—so I wouldn't go overboard.

Y'know, this might be the first time I've properly listened to Tachibana perform.

I'd spent most of her performance in the park semiconscious, so I only caught a little bit of it. I only recalled thinking she'd been singing something weird.

What would she perform for the people today? Something intense, like the music of Downtown Asakusa Metal?

I was equal parts excited and anxious.

But the moment she started playing—I gasped.

The piece actually sounded pretty normal. Normal and decent, for a singer-songwriter. Her vocals were wonderfully clear, and her lyrics evoked a refreshing sense of being young. I could imagine this track as the emotive theme song for a TV drama.

It wasn't what I expected from someone like Tachibana at all, and it followed a whole other trajectory from the snippet of what I heard her play in the park. I was a little confused. Was she toning it down because she was in a high-traffic area on a weekend?

“No... I don't think that's it.”

There was no change in direction here; Tachibana sang a variety of songs from a variety of genres.

She started with something standard and energetic. That was followed by a ballad, some cheerful J-pop, alternative rock, K-pop... Then, just after she'd given us something folky, she switched to a cover of that one Bocaloid song that was currently popular. It was more a question of what she *hadn't* played than what she had.

Suddenly, I heard a familiar set of chords, urging me to lean forward in excitement.

I know this one!

“He yelled and we met, there on the roadway...”

This was it! That one mysterious song I didn't understand in the least! And still didn't understand, despite being fully awake!

What genre was it, even? It sounded like a folk song, but the guitar seemed too aggressive for that. Could this be an original type of song that Tachibana had created herself?

Anyway, there were two things I'd noticed, having listened to her set from the very top.

The first was that Tachibana's skills as a singer were above average. If nothing else, her voice was pleasant on the ears; this wasn't one of those situations where an amateur sang in public and it was just embarrassing. I mean, most people who sang in public had a base level of skill, but hers was much more than I'd been expecting.

The second was that more people stopped to listen than I expected. At first, a couple people turned to look for a second, but most just ignored her and went on their way. That much didn't surprise me. But then, one person stopped...then two, three, four... Before I knew what was happening, we had more than ten, all listening to Tachibana intently.

The more people listened, the brighter the look on Tachibana's face became. The rhythm she strummed grew steadier and more confident. Even the sweat beading on her skin under the sun was dazzling.

It was difficult to express the impression I got, but it was like...she wasn't just a pest anymore. She was a talented girl, capable of shining like a star—that image crossed my mind effortlessly.

It might have been a bit of a stretch to say Tachibana Asagi was *born* to perform, but that was how she made me feel as I watched her, brimming with energy and vitality.

"Thanks for listenin', everyone!" Tachibana bowed her head politely after finishing up her last song.

The crowd roared and erupted into rapturous applause. It was far from the reaction a professional would get from a sellout concert in the Tokyo Dome, but for a lone middle schooler? Earning a response like *that* was truly something.

I didn't have any way of knowing she'd get this response beforehand, but I still felt like punching myself in the face for messing about with headbands and penlights. It felt kinda mean now, and I was embarrassed I'd ever done it.

That was how much of an effect her performance had on me.

"Feel free to toss me some change if you think I deserve it! I'm actually dirt poor, so I could *really* use some cash to fund what I do!"

"Is that something you admit to?!"

"What are you, a panhandler?!"

"Seriously?! Well, I guess I could still give you something..."

The audience grumbled half-jokingly about Tachibana's declaration, but still drowned her in a flurry of five-hundred-yen coins. Some of them even stepped forward to put thousand-yen bills into her money box.

Whoa... She makes some real money outta this...

I'd heard of online streamers making money off tips from their viewers, but I didn't know people handing cash to street performers was still a thing. Otoi didn't want Krimzon's members to give up on their dreams just because their families weren't rich.

I could kind of see where that wish came from now. I couldn't share her feelings completely—these were *her* childhood playmates after all—but I had seen for myself how special Tachibana's gift for

music was. To see that talent quashed just because of the family she was born into seemed like such a waste.

After a while, the applause and tips came to an end, and the wave of people receded.

“Hm?”

Most of the people were gone by now—but there was still a single girl clapping quietly, her eyes sparkling. A girl with amber hair.

“You’re Ozu’s sister!” I cried.

“Huh?! Ah! It’s you, um... Ozuma’s friend!”

She didn’t even remember my name...

Iroha skittered up to Tachibana, shooting glances my way. “That’s him! That’s the creep I was talking about before! What’s he doing with you?”

“Urgh... Explaining’d be a pain in the ass. I met this dude through Otoi-san. That’s all you really gotta know.” Tachibana’s gaze flickered in my direction as she scratched awkwardly at her cheek.

It sounded to me like she hadn’t said anything about me at all to Iroha. I wouldn’t have been surprised if both of them had been bad-mouthing me behind my back, but that hadn’t happened.

I felt a little lighter. And then anxious when it occurred to me that my existence might have been so insignificant to them, I wasn’t even worth gossiping over. It didn’t matter if I was wrong on that; I knew they still considered me the lowest of the low.

Anyway, I couldn’t believe Iroha had shown up here of all places, though I guess it made sense if I really thought about it. She liked Tachibana’s music, and it was a Saturday, so she had the time to come and listen. I’d only planned to talk to Tachibana today, but this was even better. Now I could ask Iroha the same question. Two birds, one stone, and all that.

“Tachibana. Kohinata.”

When I said their names, I saw both of them grit their teeth.

I channeled the vibes of a commander about to speak at a meeting that concerned the future of all mankind as I said, “I need to talk to you two. It’s important, so I wanna ask that you take me seriously.”

I watched Iroha tremble as though she were mustering up all the courage she had. “We’re supposed to take you seriously when you’re dressed like *that*?”

“Sorry. I should’ve taken this stuff off before saying anything...”

I totally forgot I was dressed like a rabid Tachibana fan. After going through all that effort to appear confident, I’d completely undermined myself...

The three of us moved to a chain Italian restaurant. It was the

perfect place to hang when you were working off a junior high schooler's budget. This place was famed for its Milano doria dish, which we all had a plate of. We'd opted for unlimited drinks too. This was either an early dinner or a late lunch—and we were sharing the cost, in case you were wondering.

Tachibana seemed like the type to hate paying for anyone else and to hate being paid for, and while I was free to use the money I got from my parents however I wanted, that didn't mean I could just throw it away. Iroha was the kind of person to just go with the flow too, so no one contested splitting the bill.

Honestly, I was relieved not to have to argue over who was paying for whom. I'd pretty much had no friends since the moment I started junior high, so I never had any experience of going out to a diner with my schoolmates—and in elementary school, we were too young for it.

I never thought my first time coming to a diner would be with a girl. Two girls, at that. Maybe all the laws of probability were shifting in weird directions when it came to my life.

But yeah, anyway—once the girls had started eating their pilaf and sipping at their drinks, I decided to broach the topic of what we were doing here.

“Okay, so I wanna know what it'll take for you to give up being a delinquent.”

Tachibana sighed and picked at her pilaf. “And what's it gonna take for you to drop this, Senpai?”

Iroha glanced at her friend's face, then turned her attention to me. “You're trying to get Tachibana-san to quit Krimzon, aren't you?”

“That's right.”

“Why, though?”

“Obviously because it's for the best. Otoi and Tachibana are gonna be graduating junior high eventually. They can't carry on being delinquents forever, and it'd be best if they quit while they're still seen as mischievous kids instead of anything worse.”

“I can understand that,” Iroha said. “But Krimzon is where Tachibana-san belongs. Trying to take that away from her is just cruel, even if she does have to quit when she goes to high school.”

“It's not like I'm forcing her. I'm asking her nicely what it would take for her to quit.”

“It sure *sounds* nice on the surface. But don't you think you're being insensitive? Are you actually capable of empathy?”

“Urkl!”



She got me right where it hurt. I'd heard similar accusations too many times to count during my life. It often happened after I put a lot of effort into coming up with a way to improve something and shared that idea with others. For example in elementary school, when I tried to suggest my classmates stop passing the ball to the worst players in dodgeball or soccer, or when I heard kids complain about their families, so I suggested they just run away from home.

"That's so cold, Ooboshi."

"It's like you don't have a heart..."

That was why Iroha's words put me into an instant sulk.

So what if I was being "insensitive"? This was the quickest *and* easiest way to solve this issue.

I turned away from Iroha and faced Tachibana. "There's gotta be more you wanna do than just skipping school and beating people up."

"I mean, duh..."

"Exactly. Say there was some other way you could make your music without resorting to delinquency?"

"I need cash to make music, though."

"Meaning you'll be able to quit Krimzon so long as you have a way to earn money," I said.

Tachibana winced. "I wouldn't wanna skip out on my friends there."

"Condition number two. If you have a new place to hang with your friends, you won't need Krimzon anymore."

"Nrkk... I bet ya think you're so smart, huh?!" Tachibana bit her lip.

I could see that she might not want to step away from Krimzon for sentimental reasons; her reaction told me *I* wasn't wrong either. But I already knew that. She might genuinely *like* fighting and all that jazz, but as long as music was the most important factor in her life, she'd prioritize it over the delinquent thing any day of the week. Tachibana was also a guitarist, and her fingers were the tools of her trade. Obviously she'd want to avoid fighting, because it would put her at risk of breaking them.

"You feel the same way, Kohinata?" I asked.

Kohinata Iroha was quiet for a moment. "Not really," she said. "It's not like you need to worry about what I think anyway."

"I do. I actually want to hear your thoughts more than anyone else's." *She* was the one I was trying to stop from joining a rebel gang, and *she* was Ozu's sister. If she weren't, I never would have gone this far in the first place. "Are you after a place to make music? Or are you looking for friends?"

Iroha fell silent. She kept her eyes focused on the table as she put

her straw in her mouth and drank a few sips of apple juice.

Incidentally, both girls were having apple juice. I was the odd one out with my tomato juice.

“Don’t go quiet on me. Just answering the question won’t do any harm, right?”

Iroha’s eyes flickered briefly in Tachibana’s direction—as though she was reading her expression for a clue on how to answer—but it happened so quickly I might have just imagined it.

Tachibana seemed to realize then that Iroha really wasn’t going to answer. She let out a hefty sigh while she fiddled with her earring. “Mind laying off her, Senpai? You’re kinda being a jerk right now.”

“How am I being a jerk? I’m just asking a question.”

“You’re not *just* asking, you’re pushing it. Like Iroha even cares about music.”

“T-Tachibana-san?” Iroha finally spoke.

“Of course I was gonna notice! I know you *said* you wanted in on Krimzon ’cause you wanted to make music like I did, but you’re not really into it, are you? It’s super obvious to me, ’cause *I* take music seriously.”

“I’m sorry...” Iroha mumbled.

“Don’t sweat it. I know you’re a huge fan of mine, even if you’re not cut out for performing yourself.”

“Y-Yeah, I am! That part was true!” Iroha leaned in almost aggressively.

From what they were saying, it seemed to me like Iroha hadn’t let Tachibana in on the whole truth either. It felt like there were still parts they were hiding from me, and that there were things Tachibana believed that weren’t necessarily true.

That must have been why Iroha hadn’t been fully accepted into Krimzon yet. I bet Otoi would’ve accepted her by now if Tachibana had really pushed for it, but that hadn’t happened. Meaning Tachibana herself suspected that Iroha wasn’t laying all her cards on the table—which begged the question...

“Why d’you want in on a delinquent group, then?” I asked. “It can’t be all the fighting that’s luring you in, right?”

“Um...” Iroha’s cheeks pinkened slightly, and then she lowered her voice. “It was...Tachibana-san that I was attracted to.”

“Wh-Wha—huh?” My mouth dropped open while my gratin-laden spoon slipped out of my fingers and landed on the table with a clatter. “You mean, like... You guys are in love?”

“That’s right, ‘attracted’ only ever means romantically,” Iroha snapped back, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “Sorry, I forgot for a second you had a caveman brain.”

Sorry. I’ll keep my mouth shut, then...

It actually shocked me how good Ozu's sister was at doling out aggressive insults.

"More than Tachibana-san's music, it was the way she lived her life so freely that drew me in."

Tachibana giggled. "It's that freedom that makes me such a bad girl!"

Far from looking exasperated at the smug look on Tachibana's face, the envy in Iroha's eyes only increased.

"She can do however much of whatever she wants, whenever she wants to. That's what allows her to be so confident in herself. That honestly makes me jealous, especially since we're both girls."

"You don't need to join a gang to have freedom, though. Especially in your case, when—"

—*your family's so rich*, I was about to say, but I cut myself off. It felt wrong to say that in front of Tachibana, and I also realized I was making assumptions about Iroha's situation.

In the end, it turned out I'd made the right call. It may well have been the case that the fate I shared with Iroha was at a major crossroads, entirely dependent on whether I'd finished my sentence or not.

"This is takin' forever! Why don't I just tell him?" Tachibana said.

"Okay..." Iroha nodded.

Tachibana looked me straight in the eye. "Iroha's not allowed any kinda freedom or access to entertainment."

I've heard that one before...

Otoi had mentioned something similar about Iroha, but she apparently hadn't heard any of the details. With both Tachibana and Iroha in front of me now, I had the chance to dig a little deeper.

"What does that mean, exactly?" I asked, pretending this was news to me. I couldn't exactly tell them I'd been speaking to Otoi about Iroha.

"Exactly what it sounds like," Tachibana replied. "TV, books, manga, games... Her mom won't let her near any of that stuff. Can you believe that, in this day and age? I bet her mom was raised by dinosaurs or something!"

"There's gotta be a limit, though, right?" I said. "I know the Kohinata place doesn't have a TV, but you've got a smartphone, don't you? You should be able to access all sorts of stuff on that. Manga, games, music, videos..."

"I totally said the same thing!" Tachibana exclaimed.

"Right? So..."

Our eyes dancing with amusement, we looked at Iroha. She was staring at the table again, alternating between sipping at her straw and stopping to breathe. The apple juice was rising up and down

inside the plastic cylinder as she did so. I hadn't known she had bad table manners.

"Even a parent can't have total control over their kid. But Iroha follows those rules outta *choice*. She's too much of a good girl." Tachibana guffawed.

Iroha, meanwhile, still looked uncomfortable. Her home situation must have been more complicated than I realized. This was about more than a stubborn parent banning fun versus her rebellious teenage daughter. Iroha didn't *want* to break the rules.

Wait.

I thought back over what Iroha had been saying this whole time and noticed that something was off.

"If you don't want to break any rules, why are you interested in a delinquent gang? Either way you'd be betraying your mom's trust."

"I understand that, but..." Iroha mumbled evasively.

Something in Tachibana's eyes told me she knew what this was about, but she didn't say anything. She didn't need to, though. The pieces were slowly coming together in my head.

Entertainment was banned in the Kohinata household. Ozu, however, was able to devote a ton of time to his experiments. Either Iroha was the only one under any sort of restriction, or it was a case of each child choosing whether to ignore their mother's wishes or not—and Iroha had chosen to follow the rules. I had a feeling it was the latter, and that Ozu chose to spend his time freely.

She wants to respect her mother's wishes?

Putting a hand to my chest, I started to think about my own situation. Thinking back, I barely ever disobeyed my parents. There were times when I fought back, particularly when I'd just started junior high school and found them to be overprotective, but in general, I liked spending time with them. And when they came to me and said they wanted to follow their own dreams, I was more than happy to encourage them to go for it.

If I hadn't met Ozu, I might have gone along with their wishes and followed them abroad. My stubborn desire to stay in Japan had nothing to do with family conflict or anything along those lines.

"Are you looking for an excuse to make a change?" I suggested.

A driving force that came from outside she could use to justify change, rather than something that came from within her. I realized it was a bit insensitive to point it out, though, so I did feel a bit bad for doing so.

Though Iroha stayed silent, there was a change in her blinking. That change lasted for only the shortest of moments, but it didn't escape my notice; I was highly focused right now, on the lookout for any clue I could get my hands on.

Iroha didn't elaborate at all. There was nothing to say if my guess was on the money or not. But I definitely sensed I was close. If I wasn't, I'd look like a total clown—but if Ozu's sister had no intention of opening up to me, I had to take a stab at it, or nothing would change. Nothing *could* change.

"Okay, I got it." I downed the rest of my tomato juice, absorbing every drop of its lycopene.

"Huh?" Iroha stared at me.

I'd been working my brain at full power, and now I launched into the solution I'd come to. "I'm gonna solve every last problem that you two—and Krimzon itself—are facing. I'm gonna come up with the perfect plan that'll allow all of you to have fun, regardless of where you grew up or how rich your families are—all without the need to rebel."

"The hell?" Tachibana snapped. "Who asked you to do that?!"

"Nobody!"

"You're butting in so much right now it's not even funny! You know this is actually gonna make things worse for us?"

"If that's how it's gotta be, fine," I said. "I'm doing this for me and Ozu."

"How the hell d'you think you can even *solve* all our problems at once?"

"I haven't thought of that yet."

"Oh my God! Please tell me you're messin' with us right now!"

"I'm totally serious. I might not have any ideas yet, but I'm determined to change that; that determination's gonna make all the difference."

It was too early to worry about what I had or hadn't done. Right now, it was about whether I was prepared to put in the effort or not. Sometimes, all it took to discover a novel angle to a situation was to decide you were determined to do so.

"I can't sit around doing nothing anymore. I'm going." Slamming my money on the table (just enough to cover my own gratin and drinks), I stood up.

"Huh?!" The girls gawked at me.

I was still a kid. Confidently splitting the bill like this instead of paying for anyone else was my right—not that there was any rule about it or anything.

Having completed the absolute minimum of my social obligations, I left my kouhai behind and hurried out of the restaurant.

I needed something that would change Krimzon. I needed to build something that wasn't a delinquent group—but how?

I could feel the lycopene rampaging around inside my brain. I dunno if lycopene actually does that, though.

All the way home, I was scouring the internet on my phone. “Music,” “making money,” “fun group activities,” “programming”—those were the search terms I used. I was after a clue; something that would show me how I could link Ozu, his sister, Tachibana, and Krimzon together. Unfortunately, nothing in my web searches was giving me any ideas. The “making money” part just got me sites about IT recruitment and professional networking.

“Gig work... Crowdsourcing... Skillsharing... What does any of this mean?”

Some of the sites I landed on used a lot of vocabulary I was unfamiliar with, so I decided to read their definitions. The first was gig work: apparently it was a form of one-off work that didn’t require an employment contract. I guess that meant stuff like Yuber Eats. Next up was crowdsourcing. That was a service where you could request work online from a large number of people. Last up was skillsharing: a service where you could change your individual skills into money.

“Aaargh, I can’t take this anymore! Aren’t these basically all the same? Why do they have to split them into different words?!” I cried out in frustration; it felt like my brain was overloading. Couldn’t they just shove all of these concepts under the umbrella of “online working”? I knew they were probably all technically different, but still.

That aside, I was amazed by how many recruitment offers there were online. I seriously thought only the most talented of artists could actually make a living out of music. Seeing relevant job listings all over the internet was a bit of an eye-opener.

“Huh?” I suddenly noticed a pattern that ran through a lot of the listings. “Games?”

Video game development: a group project that required both music and programming. Wasn’t this just what I was looking for?

I started checking each listing individually. A lot of them were postproduction staff for mobile or fangames. I only really knew the famous game companies like Tenchido; I never realized there were *this* many game companies and development teams, all of which I’d never heard of. Some of the listings belonged to indie groups rather than companies.

I checked some of their web pages, and I was surprised to see how interesting a lot of those projects looked. Because my uncle managed an entertainment corporation, I’d always been under the impression that video games were massive projects only large-scale companies could pull off—I’d just been proven wrong.

Thinking back, Ozu had looked like he enjoyed playing that game the other day. He’d been watching the screen like he was trying to

work out the invisible mechanics behind everything. I guess that's what happens when you're into engineering. If he enjoyed analyzing a finished game, then he'd probably be interested in creating one from scratch too.

Having said that, none of these places looked like they'd be willing to offer work to junior high students—or even high school students, if I were to lower the bar. It would take at least another five years before anyone I was trying to help had a chance of being hired to work on a game.

“There's no way I can wait that long.”

As I walked, I could feel an idea rapidly forming. Once I'd made it to my apartment building and used the elevator to reach the fifth floor, my feet automatically took me to Room 503.

“You free now?”

“Aki? What's wrong? I woulda thought you'd send me a message or something if you wanted to come over.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. But listen, Ozu...”

Ozu pressed the intercom and stepped outside, unaware that I was about to present him with my lycopene-fueled idea. The moment I uttered those words, our future would be set in stone.

“We're gonna make a game.”

“One girl wasn't enough for me... I needed two heroines to support me and become my wings, for I am the harem series protagonist!”

“How the hell did you come up with *that* from what I just told you?! There was nothing romance-related in there!”

“Youth and romance are like an enhancer and an emitter—thus making them highly compatible aura types.”

“You don't need to rip off a popular manga series to get your point across. I more or less get what you're saying.”

“They go hand in hand like horror and eroticism, sci-fi and fantasy, drama and comedy, action and adventure...”

“I get it already!”

“I never expected the founding of the 05th Floor Alliance to be all sappy like this, though. Was it all smooth sailing from then till you met me—well, Makigai Namako?”

“I wish.”

“You mean there's more?!”

“Yeah... This is the part where we come across a *massive* problem.”

Chapter 5: I'm Building Bridges between My Friend's Little Sister and My Friend!

"Whoa! It's moving! It's really moving!"

"Of course. There's nothing wrong with the programming."

It was the end of July, and the very start of the summer vacation. Ozu's room was nice and cool, thanks to the air conditioner being on full blast. A doodle animal was plodding across his computer screen in a way reminiscent of the side-scroller that was Tenchido's *Hyper Marco*. In terms of quality, it was...probably worse than whatever came out thirty years ago. Even I knew we weren't going to get mind-blowing graphics just using our modern standard equipment. That wasn't the point.

"It's kinda awesome we made this ourselves..."

I couldn't help but feel awed by what we'd done. This was nothing more than an experimental demo Ozu and I put together after deciding we were going to try and make a game, but even then I was weirdly attached to it. Looking back, it took a while. Not that many days had actually passed since we'd started, but the intense state of concentration we'd been in made the time tick by more slowly. With Ozu's programming skills, I'd thought it was going to be easy, but it didn't quite turn out that way—because everything *except* the programming fell down to me.

I came up with the character backgrounds and scribbled down the art for them. I hesitated when it came to the music and sound effects, not sure whether I should try doing them myself. In the end I decided against it, not confident I could put together something decent. After a bit of research, it turned out there were some kind souls out there uploading royalty-free music and sounds online, so I used those. It actually moved me a little bit to think that people would do something so helpful for others, and expect nothing in return. God bless them.

As I was making that silent prayer, laughter erupted next to me.

It was Ozu. He took his fingers off the controller buttons, then turned to me with a grin. "This is kinda exhilarating, y'know?"

"What is?"

"That you and I are able to share the thrill of creating something

together for once.”

“Okay, wise old man. This is your first time making a game too, right?”

“A game, yeah. But I’ve put together inventions and run experiments before. Y’know, I’ve *made* stuff.”

“When you put it like that, I guess it is all the...same?”

Inventions and games were the same? That didn’t sound quite right to me. I *did* see what Ozu was getting at, though.

I’d always been interested in and tried to support the genius stuff Ozu did, but I never tried to do any inventing of my own. I honestly thought if I tried to get involved, I’d just get in his way. I didn’t think I was capable of any sort of interesting research either, what with my crappy imagination. So I had given up before I even started. It was always easier to watch Ozu bring a project to completion from the sidelines.

“It was like you were always connecting to me via a proxy, but now we’re finally on the same server,” Ozu said.

“I have no idea what you just said. I’m guessing...you always felt like there was a bit of a wall between us, but now it’s more like we’re actually friends?”

“That sounds about right. I’m not really good at figuring out metaphors and stuff.”

“I was trying to phrase it in a way that was *easier* to understand...”

Ozu’s communication patterns were as...special as ever.

“Isn’t it exciting, though?” he went on. “Creating something with your own two hands that adds value to the world? I dunno *why*, but it’s super thrilling to me. I guess it’s a form of instinct?”

“I wonder...” I put a hand to my chest in thought. My heartbeat *was* elevated. Was this the call of the wild, something embedded within my genes? I imagined myself a caveman, elated by the success of my latest hunt. The image was so surreal I had to smile.

But...it wasn’t enough. The caveman inside me wasn’t fully satisfied. He was pounding his chest, hungry for more.

“We’re not done. Our game’s not finished,” I said.

“Aki?”

“Think about it. A game isn’t finished the moment it’s made. Until it’s actually *played*, it doesn’t have any real value.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Why don’t we play it together now, then?”

“That sounds wonderful, my friend, but it’s not what I was thinking. Besides, we playtested it to death already.”

“Good point. We already know the most efficient way to beat it, *and* we know all the glitches we could use to make it even more of a breeze. Sucks all the fun outta it.” Ozu smiled wryly and cocked his head at me. “Who’re we gonna get to play it, then?”

“I got a couple of people in mind,” I answered at once.

Though I hadn’t mentioned it to Ozu, I’d wanted those same people to play the finished product since we’d started production. Our debut work was a prototype through and through. A rough draft of the road map I was picturing in my head.

Ozu blinked at me, waiting for me to give names. I smirked back at him.

“Kohinata Iroha. Your sister, and her friend.”

“Ugh. What are *you* doing here?”

The following day, I was at the Kohinatas’, just in front of Iroha’s door. The amber-haired girl had just opened the door and was now surveying me with an icy glower.

“I heard Tachibana was coming over to hang out with you today.”

“Who told you that?”

“A trusted source.”

“Just because you’re trying to make it sound cool doesn’t make it less stalkerish,” Iroha said. “*Or* less creepy.”

“Rude much? I’ve done nothing to be ashamed of.”

I just so happened to be (fake) dating someone privy to all of Tachibana’s movements. When I shared my entire plan with Otoi, she jumped right on board.

“Nothing you’ve said was actually an answer to *why* you’re here. Tachibana-san’ll be here soon, so I think you should go home,” Iroha said.

“I shouldn’t, actually.”

“Huh?”

“And Tachibana’s already here.”

Tachibana poked her head out from behind me sheepishly. “Sorry, Iroha. I dragged him along with me...”

“Tachibana-san?!” Iroha’s eyes widened.

I patted Tachibana on the shoulder and smirked at Iroha. “Just like Tachibana said, I’m here on her invitation. I don’t think you can call that stalking, can you?”

“Nngh... Otoi-san ordered me to do it, so I didn’t have a choice. I swear, people never used to throw their weight around this much, especially for dumb stuff like this.”

“No one’s making you do anything. You’re free to disobey Otoi if you want to. Or anything else you wanna do—as long as it doesn’t conflict with your half-baked ideas of what it means to rebel, I guess.”

“Mmmrgh!”

Tachibana wore the scowl of a brat who’d just been put in her place, while I had the sleazy grin of a dude who’d just stolen another

man's wife. It definitely *looked* like I was doing something shady, but in reality I was playing completely by the rules. This scene was clean, pure, and suitable for all ages.

"There you have it," I said.

"I don't want it," Iroha shot back. "I invited Tachibana-san over because she said there was something she wanted to do. We have plans, and the polite thing to do would be to not interrupt us."

"Uh, yeah, about that..." Tachibana was pale and clammy. "Look, I'm really sorry, okay?"

"Tachibana-san?"

Interesting. Usually she has no problem running her mouth.

That unkind thought was a nice slice of revenge for all the times she had picked on me.

"This is what Tachibana wanted to do," I answered in her place.

"Huh?" Iroha stared.

"There's something I want the two of you to do for me—and so I had Tachibana organize this meeting."

"I'm sorry! This guy totally caught me up in his schemes!" Tachibana cried.

"You don't have to apologize," Iroha said. "Is something wrong, though? I know you don't want to disobey Otoi-san, but that doesn't mean you have to listen to this creep, does it?"

"It does, actually," Tachibana said. "But I can't tell you why..."

"Because she'll get rewarded by Otoi if she does," I said. "She's wanted to go to her favorite singer's concert for so long—and Otoi's got her tickets."

"Tachibana-san?!"

"I'm soooooorry! It's literally the singer who got me into music! I've wanted to go *forever*!"

"O-Okay... I guess that's fine, then..."

Is it?

Was it really this easy to earn Iroha's forgiveness? Just switch on the waterworks? I could hardly believe it.

Iroha now held a wailing Tachibana in her arms, though I knew Tachibana was just putting on an act. Iroha patted her head and glared at me. "What kind of disgusting things were you planning to do to us?"

"Disgusting things? It's nothing like that."

Iroha really didn't trust me, did she? ...Probably because I'd never given her the slightest reason to. No worries; I could start gaining her trust now.

With a sigh to reset myself, I jabbed my thumb down the hallway behind me. At its other end was a corner of the Kohinata place I wouldn't be surprised if Iroha had never been to at all.

“Ozuma’s room?”

“Yup. You two are gonna play a game in Ozu’s room.”

The noise of me closing the door behind the two girls alerted Ozu, who was busy with the monitor and PC on his desk, to our presence.

He turned around. “You made it. I’m just about done setting things up.”

“Thanks, Ozu. Have a seat, you two.” I put a light hand on my confused friend’s little sister’s back, and led her to a stool.

“S-Sure...”

I’d bought these stools recently at a hardware store using the living expenses I got from my parents. It did mean I’d have to cut back on my food budget for a bit, but sacrifices have to be made sometimes.

Tachibana had already sat down and was looking around the room like a kid at a museum. “This room is awesome. Is your bro a scientist, Iroha?”

“N-No. He’s just a nerd.”

“This goes way beyond ‘nerd’! Man, just being here is getting me pumped!” Stars were glittering in Tachibana’s eyes.

Iroha, meanwhile, looked a little awkward. Either she was conflicted about this room belonging to her brother, or it was the usual modesty you have for your own home. She was pointedly avoiding Ozu’s gaze.

The issues these two have really run deep, huh?

It didn’t matter. Theirs was just one of the problems I planned to solve, and it all started with this very day.

My main focus was on building a bridge between my friend and my friend’s little sister. Tachibana Asagi and Krimzon came second—and as much as that made me feel bad, Otoi was responsible for them. Personally, what happened to Krimzon didn’t matter to me, just as the Kohinata siblings were complete strangers to Otoi. We were only joining forces because my plan had the potential to solve their issues too.

So saying, Tachibana’s innocent reaction made me feel a little warm and fuzzy inside. When I spoke to her, I used the tone of a relative speaking gently to a young child. “You like this kinda stuff, Tachibana?”

“I love mechas and machines! They’re just so tough, y’know? And awesome!”

I chuckled. “Let me guess. You’re the kind of delinquent who’s gonna buy a motorcycle and ride it around the second you have enough money.”

“Duh! Man, I want my license so bad!”

“You’re actually gonna get a license, huh?”

How admirable. Well, for a delinquent. Not a normal person.

“There’s nothing cool about ridin’ without a license,” she said.

“You’ll probably just wind up in an accident and get killed, as well as killing the other person.”

“May you hold that opinion your entire life,” I said.

“Hey, Kohinata-senpai! What’s that UFO-looking thingy over there? Is it radio-controlled? It’s got a propeller!”

“That’s just a drone,” Ozu explained. “I programmed it to carry stuff, and to lock and unlock doors. That’s why it’s got that arm on it.”

I stiffened. I’d seen plenty of examples of Ozu’s inventions being misunderstood by other people. They always had this sense that he was up to something terrifying, though that might have been because of the insulting rumors those lowlifes spread about his experiment at school.

It was the same thing with this drone. I could easily see how people might take his explanation the wrong way. A drone with the function of unlocking doors and carrying stuff could easily be used to steal, for example.

Ozu wasn’t a thief. He’d told me before that he wanted a drone that could pick up parcels that were dropped at the front door and carry them to his room. It was just like how the genius inventor of dynamite never intended for it to be a lethal weapon.

It was too sad to see someone have their innocent intentions misunderstood like that and creep people out—*that* was why I was now on guard.

“Oh my God! You’re a genius, Kohinata-senpai!” There wasn’t a hint of mistrust in Tachibana’s eyes.

I hadn’t expected that reaction at all. Tachibana was our kouhai, and a shallow girl belonging to a delinquent group. I thought she’d be the last person to have any interest in Ozu’s activities.

Yeah, I’m stereotyping.

“What other stuff have you made?!” Tachibana leaned forward on her seat.

Ozu smiled at her. “A couple of things. But d’you mind playing the game I programmed before we get into that?”

“You made a *game*? You betcha I wanna play it!”

“Thanks. Here.”

“Thank you!” Tachibana snatched the controller from Ozu. Her cheeks were flushed bright red from excitement.

If I hadn’t been expecting her initial reaction to Ozu’s room, I *definitely* hadn’t expected her to be so excited over our game.

According to Tachibana, she didn’t pick on the people she liked—she was more straightforward with her affection. Could that look on

her face mean she'd taken a bit of a shine to Ozu?

Obviously, I wasn't saying she'd fallen in love at first sight, or taken a shot from Cupid's arrow and turned to mush, but I was seeing some potential here. All it needed was some careful buildup.

Tachibana leaned over to whisper to Iroha, who was sitting next to her. "Y'know, your brother's kinda hot."

"Huh?"

"That's gotta be a bummer for you, though, right? I bet your friends are always askin' you to introduce 'em!"

"That's never happened, actually... I've never heard anyone call him hot either."

"You serious? Guess I'm the only girl in the world with taste."

Come on, Tachibana, I can totally hear you! Keep the girl talk to when there aren't any guys around, okay?

Probably because he wasn't interested in what they were whispering about, Ozu didn't seem to hear them at all. So I guess that worked out.

I did have to agree with Tachibana, though. It was hard to notice because his hairstyle and fashion sense sucked, but when Ozu genuinely smiled, you could tell his facial features were actually pretty attractive. And it made sense. His sister was attractive enough to turn heads, and he shared her genes; there was no way he'd be ugly.

A subdued boy who was handsome but didn't put the effort in and his kouhai, an elusive delinquent-slash-singer who had noticed his charms...

I could see that pairing being in a dating sim, light novel, or rom-com manga series. Ozu might actually have what it takes to be the main character in one of those. So what did that make me? His wingman?

Honestly, I liked giving advice and helping people out, so maybe that'd suit me. Wait, maybe "like" was the wrong word. It was more that I wasn't very good at being in the spotlight. I wasn't anything special, so any sort of attention like that just made me want to hide.

At some point, while I'd been thinking things over, Ozu must have started up the game. That cheerful music was my clue.

"Ooh! It's startin'!" Tachibana's face lit up.

"Yeah..." Iroha's expression was stiff, as though this was making her nervous.

Neither of them looked like they were particularly used to holding a controller. As I thought, they probably didn't have a lot of experience with video games.

The moment the menu screen appeared, complete with frolicking animal, I heard a burst of laughter.

“What the hell is that thing s’posed to be?”

“Wha—?! Are you *laughing* at it?” I cried.

“Why’re you mad, Senpai?”

“Nrk... No reason...”

“Oh, I know! You drew it, didn’tcha?”

“Y-Yeah, I did. So what?”

“Huh. Nah, it’s pretty cute.” Tachibana snickered.

Was she seriously picking holes in the work of an amateur? I knew it was bad, okay? It was my first time properly drawing something!

“You think so too, right Iroha?”

“Huh?”

Apparently, Iroha wasn’t expecting to be singled out. I thought she’d have been the first to agree with Tachibana, but instead she kept glancing at the screen and the artistic (that’s the most positive adjective I can use without outright lying) animal on-screen.

Wait... Could this mean I’d gotten through to Ozu’s sister *already*?

My rising hopes lasted little more than a second.

“Y-Yeah. That cat’s drawn so badly it’s not even cute.”

In the end, her opinion was as scathing as Tachibana’s.

Dammit. I knew they were right, but still!

“Y’heard her! You need to work a little harder on your drawing skills, Senpai!”

“Don’t think I’m gonna let this go easily, you menace!”

I was gonna study up *so hard* and improve my artistic skills *so much* I’d have her eating her words!

So anyway, our game’s playtest session started in the worst possible way—for me at least.

Two hours later.

“Leave this part to me, Iroha! You go, quick! Go, go, go!”

“R-Right! There!”

“Nice one! Now we just gotta dodge these obstacles and get through this bit here...”

“Careful, Tachibana-san! That’s where that trap comes down from the ceiling!”

“I know!”

Despite the dated graphics, we were arrogant enough to implement a co-op mode. That was what the girls were tackling now as they exchanged info and tactics with each other. Their once straight backs had started taking on an angle about thirty minutes ago, and now they were both leaning forward like they were about to get sucked in by the screen. Even though I was part of the team that had put all those obstacles in place, I found myself silently rooting for them.

Eventually...

“Go! Jump, now!”

“Juuump! Ah...”

They had overcome the final boss (a “dragon,” that thanks to my improved skills at the point I drew it, I’d grade at a D rather than an F), and the playable bunny was just about to grab the shiny flag beyond...

“We made it!” The pair cheered in unison, just as a triumphant fanfare sounded from the game.

Iroha and Tachibana lifted their hands above their heads to exchange a high five and then, with cheeks red from excitement, started to compliment each other on aspects of their gameplay. I was clapping for them before I even knew what I was doing, my chest swelling with emotion. I turned to glance at Ozu—he looked uncharacteristically content, and was clapping along.

“Damn, I can’t even! That was so frickin’ good! I can’t even remember what time we started playing!” Tachibana said.

“Aha ha ha! Me too! It’s been ages since I’ve gotten so into something,” Iroha said.

“I think I actually stopped noticing the crappy drawings about halfway through. I dunno, I might even have started to *like* them. Like their ugly squishiness makes ’em *sorta*...”

“Cute? You thought so too, Tachibana-san? I actually started thinking that as well!”

“They so *aren’t*, though!”

“Huh?!”

They’d been so mean about my drawings before, but now even those were getting praised. I was sure they were determined to hate my drawings just because *I* was the artist, but maybe not. The moment they’d started to see the good in them, they decided that none of them were *that* bad. That was pretty decent of them, actually—even if Tachibana still couldn’t bring herself to call them cute.

“It’s weird, y’know?” Tachibana said. “The only games I’ve really played are the free ones you can get on your phone, but I *have* seen let’s plays online, so I know the kinda games that are out there.”

“You’re saying that in terms of quality, this barely compares to anything modern, right?” I asked. “Obviously we know that.”

“But even then, it was still super fun. Like, the drawings don’t suck *that* bad, and though the music sounds kinda cheap, the gameplay itself is good. But none of that is enough to explain how I enjoyed it so much. And I dunno why I did, really...”

“You just answered your own question,” I said.

“Huh?”

““The gameplay itself is good.””

Tachibana blinked at me, unsure of what I meant. Which was fair enough—I wasn't entirely convinced when the idea first struck me either.

After deciding to make the game, I went all out—I did online research, subscribed to video channels that commented on game design, and all sorts of other stuff. Along the way, I started to form an idea—a very, *very* vague idea—of what made a game a game. So many who had done this before, and who I adopted as role models in my mind, shared the exact same sentiment.

Now, I was about to share that profound knowledge with Tachibana, as it had been shared with me: “Games have to appeal to the player's inner child.”

“Inner child? What's that all about?” she asked at once.

I told her, relaying the words in my head like I was reading them from a dictionary. “Rock, paper, scissors. Tag. Hide and seek. Dodgeball. Remember playing all these games in elementary?”

“Over and over, yeah. Till I was sick of 'em.”

“Are you *really* sick of them, though? If you played them now, would you still find them fun?”

“Hm... I dunno. I guess I must've outgrown them at some point, but it probably *would* be fun to play them all again now.”

“Right? But how do you know that?”

“Uh... Dunno.”

“It's because they're all games that have been completely perfected.”

“Say again?” Tachibana stared at me blankly.

“They've got solid rules, win conditions, and winning is the main goal. Doesn't that remind you of video games?”

“I guess it does!”

The games we played as kids didn't have mind-blowing story lines, gorgeous graphics, or majestic scores. But they *did* have players all over the world, and they had been enjoyed by countless generations. It was no exaggeration to call those games the gold standard when it came to entertainment, to the extent I would place them alongside the greatest video games out there.

“The best games are the ones you never get sick of,” I said. “That was why the two of you got so hooked.”

Even in our age of high-budget games, those made on a shoestring budget were still capable of attracting a large, ardent fanbase. Thanks to the proliferation of platforms where you could advertise your indie project, there were more low-budget games competing with the big titles than there used to be.

In fact, indie games tended to be more distinct and played it less safe than big industry titles, earning them a lot of fans who snapped

up any independent title they could get their hands on. According to my research, indie games had become majorly trendy because of this.

“As long as we have an idea, even people like us don’t need a ton of money to create a game that can gain fans from all over the world. The only real problem we’d face would be a lack of programming knowledge and skill.” There were tons of people out there who longed to become game developers but would never make it; we had something to set us apart from them. “Ozu will make any idea we come up with a reality. He’s got the knowledge and skill we’d need, and the ability to learn anything he *doesn’t* know right away.”

“Listen, I can tell you’re really hyped about this, and I’m sorry to rain on your parade, but...” Tachibana said, cutting me off. “I’m not actually sure what you’re on about.”

“You’re kidding, right? Surely you can guess.”

“Well, yeah... I’m not *that* dumb,” Tachibana muttered with a pout. She’d started sitting cross-legged on her stool.

Talk about bad manners. Plus, she should probably keep her thighs together if she didn’t want to risk me seeing her panties.

Anyway, obviously I didn’t just make this demo as a pointless vent for my creative urges, and I wasn’t having the girls play it just to show off how amazingly talented my friend Ozu was. I only had one goal in all of this, and it was both plain and simple.

In fact, it was the very same goal I’d had from the start. Everything I’d done recently was for the exact same purpose.

“How about leaving Krimzon behind and making a game with us? We want you two to make the music for it. Like the background music and the theme song.”

“Uh, I kinda wanna be a regular musician, though,” Tachibana said.

“You’d be fine to carry on with your usual activities. You can do whatever you want with the time you’re not working on the game music.”

“I also feel like there’s nothin’ in it for me.”

“Oh, but there is,” I said at once. Of course I’d thought of this beforehand, ensuring that all my pieces were perfectly positioned on the board for this very discussion. It wouldn’t do for Tachibana to think I wasn’t prepared. “Don’t you remember what I said? We can make a game that appeals to people all over the world. We don’t need money, just an idea.” I paused to let it sink in. “We’re gonna sell it. If all goes to plan, we’ll be making money off this thing.”

As expected, the look in Tachibana’s eyes changed completely.

What she wanted more than anything else was to write and perform her music. She’d told me that she joined Krimzon to raise funds for her lifestyle and make friends—if not for those two things,

she would never have raised her middle finger to society and told it to go screw itself. At least, that was the info I'd gleaned from the profile I'd spent the last few days building up while observing her.

"That *does* sound pretty tempting..." Tachibana paused before voicing the final barrier to her assent. "But I couldn't turn my back on Otoi-san for anything!"

"Otoi's already agreed to let you do this."

"*Huh?!*"

Something else I'd thought of in advance. My LIME chat with Otoi was already up on my phone, so all I needed to do was thrust that phone in Tachibana's face.

"Stotally fine for Asagi to quit rebellin' 'n' start creatin'. That's what I want for her, actually."

Otoi texted so similarly to how she spoke, I'd bet Tachibana was hearing her leader's voice in her head right now. Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped, before freezing in that position. There were no obstacles to me getting what I wanted; Tachibana had nowhere to run.

"It's now up to you to make a choice," I said. "There's only one question remaining: do you *want* to do this?"

I was practically pressing the phone up against her nose now. Tachibana whimpered and bent backwards like she was trying to get away. But I wasn't hearing a no.

Tachibana glanced once at the friend sitting next to her, then started scratching at her cheek awkwardly. "If this means Iroha doesn't have to be a delinquent, then I think it's a good idea," she mumbled. "Same goes for me."

"Tachibana-san..." Iroha murmured.

"I think you should go for it too, Iroha. If you did, you'd get to play a super fun game all you wanted, right? You could wave goodbye to the boredom you have to go through every day."

Tachibana loaded Iroha with persuasive points one after the other. I would've expected nothing less from a girl who went full speed ahead as soon as she'd made up her mind on something. She was the most annoying enemy you could ever have, but once she was on your side, her brazen pushiness made her a reliable ally.

This should have been an attractive offer for Ozu's sister too. She had spent most of her life in boredom, with no sources of entertainment. She was after a special place to belong, where she could achieve something extraordinary and enjoy entertainment to her heart's content. This had to be enticing to her.

Seeing as this offer meant working with Ozu, it should also be enough to build a single bridge between two siblings whose relationship was on the verge of collapse.

Please, Iroha! Take my hand...

There wasn't a hint of change in the expression on her face. I was praying so hard that the imaginary hands in my head were pushing together with enough force to make the thick veins on their arms pop up.

The next second, I had my answer.

"I'm sorry. But I won't be taking part."

A clear-cut rejection with no room for misinterpretation.

"I'm sorry for putting you in a bind, Tachibana-san. I'm going to stop asking to join your group."

"Iroha... C'mon, you're makin' me wanna cry over here. It's like you don't even wanna hang out with me anymore."

"That's not true. You'll let me know the next time you go busking, won't you? I'll come right over!"

"You know I will..." Tachibana said, clearly dejected.

The bright smile on Iroha's face drew a clear line. The next time she went to see Tachibana's performance, it would be as a fan, not a friend. That was why Tachibana couldn't return her smile.

"You've probably got a lot of planning to do. I know I'd only be in the way, so let me get out of your hair." With that, Iroha dashed from the room. Her tone remained cheerful, but her movements were rushed—like she was running from us.

"Iroha?! Wait!" Tachibana reached out a hand, but she didn't even get to complete the action before Iroha's footsteps turned into the sound of the front door opening and closing. Tachibana's hand dropped listlessly through the air. "How the heck is she so fast?!"

I felt like I'd just witnessed someone perform a parody of a guy the moment after his girlfriend broke up with him, but the situation meant I couldn't laugh. The look on Tachibana's face, like an abandoned cat, made me feel terrible.

"Ah, um... I'm sorry," I said.

"I guess you know you've done something wrong, seein' as you're apologizing."

"Sometimes you have to apologize *despite* having done nothing wrong."

"Only if you're Japanese. Imagine being in the major leagues and accidentally throwing a beanball. If you apologize, they're gonna think you're a headhunter—and that's the last thing you want."

"I thought music was your thing, not baseball."

"Okay, Mr. Nitpicker. You *do* know all those baseball broadcasts on TV are free entertainment, right?"

"You bet I do. Some of our players have been making waves overseas lately."

Hence why Major League Baseball was being shown on Japanese television, presumably. That was news to me, though.

“But yeah, you don’t *really* hafta apologize,” Tachibana said. “Your idea was objectively good. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Thanks, that actually means a lot. Doesn’t make me feel any better for ruining your friendship, though. That’s never happened to me before...”

“Aha ha! You went from ‘Make games with me!’ to ‘I humbly plead your forgiveness’ in like, two seconds flat. That’s actually hilarious!”

“That’s Aki for you,” Ozu said.

“Don’t take her side, Ozu.”

“Hey, that was a compliment. Pretty sure Tachibana-san was complimenting you too, right?” He turned to her.

“I sure was! You were all pushy at first, but now it turns out you’ve got a weakness. That’s what we call ‘adorable!’”

“I gotta agree on that one. I’m glad I found you, Tachibana-san. Sure is fun discussing Aki, huh?”

Tachibana giggled. “Aww, Kohinata-senpai, you’re gonna make me blush!”

“The heck is wrong with you two?”

They really couldn’t flirt with each other without making fun of me?

“Hey, Ozu. Is it really okay to let your sister run off by herself like that?”

“Eh, she’ll be fine. It’s still light out, and it’s not like she’s in elementary school anymore.”

“Yeah, but she was acting weird.”

“Hmm... I’ve never been able to tell when someone’s ‘acting weird,’ so I can’t really confirm or deny that.”

“Same, to be honest. Wait, no, that’s not the problem here.”

All I got from Ozu was a vacant stare. As usual, for as much concern as he showed about Iroha, she might as well have been a stranger rather than his sister. Or maybe I was showing *too much* concern?

Well, so what if I was? If I was just overthinking things, and Iroha was actually fine, so be it. All that would happen is I’d embarrass myself a little. It’d be a thousand times worse to assume *nothing* was wrong, ignore her, and allow something terrible to happen.

“Sorry, but I don’t think I can just let her go,” I said. “I’m going after her.”

“Then I’m comin’ too!” Tachibana said.

“Should I go too?” Ozu asked.

“You guys wait here.”

“How come?” Tachibana shot back. “I’m her friend! It makes way more sense for me to go than a rando like you!”

“I get that, it’s just...”

My gut said they were both too close to Iroha to tell her the things she needed to hear—but I wasn’t. It was deeply arrogant of me, though, which was why I didn’t voice my true thoughts out loud.

“Look, please just wait here for me, okay? I’ll be back!”

“Y-You’re leaving me with Kohinata-senpai? What are we s’posed to do?!”

“Play games!”

“With my friend’s older brother?! That’s just plain weird!”

I ignored Tachibana’s cries. I didn’t have time to do this skit with her. If she and Ozu hit it off, I was ready to step up into the role of the main character’s buddy and celebrate their happiness.

Good luck, Tachibana.

It was with that reckless thought that I ran through the lobby and out of the building. I was presented with a familiar view: two paths. One to the right, and one to the left.

Which way should I go?

It took less than a second for me to make up my mind. I selected the path that I took to go to school. I was dealing with an honor student with limited freedom here—there was no way she’d pick the path that *didn’t* lead to school. Without a destination in mind, she’d probably pick the way she was more used to.

“Still don’t know if that means I can catch up with her. There are a ton of branching paths down this way too.”

I didn’t know anything about Iroha’s personality or thinking process. I simply didn’t know her that well, or for long enough.

Wait... I’m getting a brainwave.

It was precisely *because* I didn’t have that much knowledge of Kohinata Iroha that my brain came up with a possibility very, very quickly. Not that it was based on any evidence, or that I was remotely confident in it.

“It’s not like I’ve got any other suggestions. Time to take a gamble!”

By the time I made it to the park, I was out of breath. This park was on our route to school, and it was the place where Tachibana and Iroha first met (or so I’d pieced together from the information given to me by Tachibana). The blue summer sky was tinged by the lightest touches of red, a signal of the approaching sunset. There was a slight breeze that rustled the leaves on the thick trees and shrubs.

This place definitely wasn’t grand enough to be called a nature park, but it was a generous size considering it was right in the middle of a residential area. Most of the playground equipment had been removed due to recent complaints about noisy kids, and all that was left were a depressing horizontal bar and a tiny slide. There were a

ton of benches, though.

Literally nothing about this place made kids want to play here, which was probably why there weren't any. For that matter, there were barely any people at all...

Though there *was* a conversation going on in the park's center.

"Wait, wait, wait! Hey! Yo! Why'd you come running over here? Makin' a game with Asagi-chan sounds like major fun, yo!"

"I-I think so too. And it's not like you wanted to be delinquent, is it, Iroha-chan?"

"I can see where you two are coming from, but you guys didn't see the way Tachibana-san reacted when she was asked to make games with them..."

"What about it, yo?"

"It made me realize she has a focus."

"A focus?"

"Right. She wants to make music. That's a solid, unchanging focus. That's what makes it so easy for her to quit being a delinquent and switch over to something else instead. She can change the people and environment around her without having to change herself."

"And you *don't* have a focus like that, Iroha-chan?"

"Of course I don't. I just thought Tachibana-san seemed cool, and that made me jealous. She's great at music, and she fits right in with being a delinquent. There wasn't anything I wanted to *do*. I just wanted to be like *her*."

"Hey! Yo! You know what that means, yo? You're a wannabe, yo!"

"Aha ha ha! You don't mince words, huh? You're completely right, though..."

I wasn't quite sure what I was looking at. If I closed my eyes, I could hear three people speaking. But there *weren't* three people, or even two. It was just Kohinata Iroha, standing there by herself.

Is this like an angel and devil on the shoulder situation? But then she wouldn't be saying any of this stuff out loud... I guess it's more like she's putting on a one-man show?

I decided to keep on watching from behind a tree. My mind was quietly urging her to continue—I felt like I was about to discover a new side to Kohinata Iroha, and even if I wasn't, I'd never seen anyone acting like a total weirdo before; I was naturally curious.

"Don't you think you might be...holding yourself back, Iroha-chan?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've always kept your...true self hidden from other people, haven't you? Like, you actually thought that animal in the game was super cute, but because Asagi-chan said it was ugly, you pretended your opinion was the same as hers, right?"

“That’s...only because I didn’t want to rain on Tachibana-san’s parade. She was getting really excited about the whole thing, after all.”

“Hey! Yo! So you *are* holdin’ back, yo! If you thought it was cute, you shoulda said so, yo!”

The skit went on. It was surreal, all right, but it wasn’t cringy at all—and I think that had to do with Iroha’s acting skills. They were out of this world.

They were so good it was like I was actually seeing three separate people: a majorly outgoing Iroha; a quiet, reserved Iroha; and a more neutral Iroha, who I took to be the “real” one. She had split herself into three people with separate voices, separate personalities, and separate life experiences.

There was nothing superficial about her acting either—it was as though she’d actually *become* these people. And she could switch between them in an instant to hold a natural dialogue. I was witnessing the work of a phenomenal actress.

“Whoa...” I couldn’t help but gasp in astonishment. I was so enthralled by my friend’s little sister’s performance that I was frozen behind that tree with my head sticking out.

That turned out to be a mistake.

“Huh?” Having come to a natural break in her performance, Iroha had moved—only to end up looking in my direction.

When our eyes met, I realized she caught me. Caught me snooping.

“Wh-Wh-Wh...” Shocked to discover the existence of a peeper, Iroha’s mouth opened and closed repeatedly.

“Wait! It’s not what you think!” I waved my hands in front of my face desperately as I defended myself.

It seemed she hadn’t heard me. Iroha’s face turned bright red before my very eyes. “Y-You saw me... You saw me... You saw me...”

“I did, yeah! But don’t worry about it—I’m not weirded out at all!”

“*You* just brought up being weirded out before I even said anything! That’s proof you *are* secretly weirded out!”

“Okay, so maybe I was for a second! But don’t worry about it—after watching for a bit, the only thing going through my mind was how amazing your acting is.”

“So you *were* weirded out at first! If you think I’m gonna stop worrying just ’cause you told me not to, you’ve got another thing coming!”

“Now you’re just looking for problems! You’re gonna have a much easier time in life if you choose ignorance sometimes, y’know.”

“How about you get off your high horse and stop *lecturing* me?”

You're the one in the wrong here, Ooboshi-senpai!"

"You're a hundred percent right!"

She had to have a razor-sharp mind to hit me with that perfect slab of logic point-blank. Did that mean she was actually kinda smart? Seeing this side of her reminded me that she really *was* Ozu's sister—even if the two of them barely spoke.

Iroha was currently squatting behind a bench and growling at me like a feral creature. Her glare was equal parts embarrassment and wariness. It reminded me of a tiny, cute animal.

I quickly cleared the fluffy clouds in my head. "You don't have to glare at me like that. I'm not gonna tell anyone about what you just did."

"You're gonna blackmail me, though, aren't you? Hold it over me to make me do all kinds of unspeakable things!"

"I am *not*! Anyway, I thought you weren't allowed access to entertainment. How d'you know about that kinda stuff?"

"Tachibana-san let me read manga on her phone when we hung out..."

"Sounds like she's been making you read stuff that's gonna corrupt you." I sighed, then sat down on the bench she was hiding behind—without a hint of bashfulness, of course. I was doing nothing wrong. "I know I'm sticking my nose in, so feel free to mentally throw a ton of insults my way. Could you at least pretend to have a civilized conversation with me in the meantime?"

"What the heck is that supposed to mean?"

"It means talk to me, and forget for a minute that you think I'm a total weirdo."



As far as Iroha was concerned, I was just her brother's friend—not exactly the kind of person she'd trust her innermost anxieties to. Even then, I wanted to know what was concerning her.

If this made me look like a nosy bastard who didn't know when to give up, so be it—I wanted her to open her heart up to me like I was one of the characters in her one-woman show. It felt to me like that was the only way she'd be able to say what was on her mind to another human being.

“You're super weird, Ooboshi-senpai.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Kind of a scumbag too.” After a resigned sigh, Iroha finally stood up. She walked around to the other side of the bench and sat down next to me—leaving a space that could probably fit another two people between us.

Clearly, she was on high alert, as though she were dealing with a stranger. Half of her butt was even hanging off the end. You would have thought she could've spared a thought for my feelings and not left *quite* as big a gap.

Well, I guess it should have been enough that she was even willing to talk to me.

Once she'd sat down, we stayed silent for a while. I watched Iroha out of the corner of my eye as she stared at the hem of her skirt, which she was gripping tightly, and I tried to put some words together. There was so much I wanted to talk about, it was difficult to know where to start. I decided to get the pointless stuff out of the way first.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Huh? For what?”

“For thinking my animal drawings were cute.”

“Ah!” Iroha's cheeks turned red, as though she was remembering her skit from just a moment ago. I felt bad for bringing her attention back to her embarrassing performance, but I really wanted to get my gratitude across. Hopefully she could find it in her heart to forgive me.

“I always hated art class. I have no artistic talent, so having to show my drawings to other people was like actual torture.”

“Aha ha ha. That's pretty relatable.”

“Is it? You're an honor student, and I always got the impression girls tend to be better artists than guys. I woulda thought you'd be amazing at art.”

“I'm okay in art class. All you gotta do is draw stuff the way it looks, right? But if someone said I could draw anything I wanted, I'd be less confident. I'd probably come out with something really lousy.”

“Huh. That's a bit of a head-scratcher.”

Was that down to her personality and environment too?

But I could get to that later. Right now, I had bigger fish to fry.

"The point is that I suck at art. But we needed art for the game, so I looked up how to draw, and then drew."

I knew that the drawings I did for the game were lackluster, but my preparation definitely wasn't. "Lackluster" was just the best I could manage after putting everything I had into learning and practicing.

"So when I heard you liked them, honestly, it made me pretty happy."

"I-I see. Um... You're welcome, I guess."

"Mm."

"Though you're probably better off *not* relying on my tastes."

"It's not like I'm gonna be asking the public at large for its opinion, so yours'll do just fine. It's fulfilling enough to know I've got just one fan out there."

"That's how it is for you, huh? I can't say I really get it..."

I wasn't familiar with this emotion till today either. It was probably only something that could be understood by people who had made something, shared it, and received feedback. Tachibana might've been someone I could really learn from in that regard. Iroha, on the other hand, who'd never shown anyone one of her creations, could never... Wait a sec. I might have something here.

"Y'know that performance you were just doing?" I said.

"You're bringing up that dumb thing *again*? I thought you were gonna ask me something serious, like about my personal life."

"Well, personally, I still think that's important, but..." I paused to give her time to prepare for what came next. "Your acting was so good it honestly floored me."

"Huh?" Taking that curveball right to her chest, Iroha gaped at me.

"At first, when I only heard your voice, I thought there were three people there. It genuinely sounded like three people, each with a totally different voice and personality, were having a conversation."

"But when you saw it was just me, you thought it was super weird and gross, right?"

"Just 'cause I saw you doesn't make it any less amazing. Actually, the point I realized it was *just* you was the point I was majorly *impressed*."

"R-Really? Thanks, I guess."

My enthusiasm only seemed to confuse Iroha. Strangely, that perplexed look on her face felt like the gentlest expression I'd ever seen from her. Her tiny mouth was quivering like a big burst of happiness had come up from her heart to fill her cheeks and she was

struggling to contain it.

“Now do you get what I was saying before about how I felt?”

“Ah...” Understanding flashed across Iroha’s features.

“You’ve got a fan. Isn’t that fulfilling?”

“But I haven’t *made* anything.”

“No? I reckon you could perform like that in public and easily make money off of it.”

Essentially, it would be the same as Tachibana’s musical performances.

“It’s not like that at all,” Iroha said. “It’s just something I do to entertain myself.”

“So, what, you’re playing around?”

“Well, um... You’ve kinda figured out how my family is, haven’t you?” Iroha glanced at me out of the corner of her eye.

I nodded right away. “Entertainment’s banned in your home. That’s it, right?”

“Yeah. I get the feeling mom hates that stuff.”

“That stuff, like...TV, you mean?”

“Not just TV. Everything.”

“Everything?”

“Yep. TV, music, games, manga... She hates pretty much anything that can be defined as entertainment.”

“All of that? And here I thought the lack of TV was your only issue...”

“She didn’t used to be this strict. She hated it all, but me and Ozuma were still allowed to watch TV.”

That seemed way more normal than what was happening now. Cutting your kids off from entertainment just because *you* hated it didn’t sound like a call a reasonable parent would make. So what changed to make their mom so strict?

“How long has that stuff been banned in your house?” I asked.

“I *think* since my last years of elementary school. I used to pretend to be the cute characters from the anime they showed on Sundays. I would think hard about how I could copy them as closely as possible, so I could be as cool as they were. But don’t tell anyone, okay? Thinking back, it was kinda embarrassing.”

“That’s something all kids do at some point or another. I used to box against pull cords and wave around rolled-up newspapers like swords.”

“R-Right?! I’m not *that* weird, am I?”

“N-No...”

Iroha slid right into my personal space, and I found myself leaning away. The close-up look on her face was so cute, it was making my heart pound. I guess the gap between us on the bench must have

shrunk at some point.

"I don't think I was weird to do it," Iroha said, "but I remember mom going nuts for some reason when she saw me copying those characters."

"She went nuts? What, like she got mad at you?"

"She was *kinda* mad, but her reaction was more like there were a ton of emotions running through her. Anger, and sadness too..."

I guess that is what you describe as "nuts."

"That was when the TV disappeared from our house. Mom told us to stop engaging with entertainment and to focus on our studies."

"Did your mom ever say why she reacted like that?"

"Never. And when I saw how sad it made her, I couldn't bring it up either."

"That's why you just let her take away your freedom without a struggle..."

Iroha didn't say or do anything to confirm it. She might have felt that to do so would be betraying her mother.

Though I guessed every family was different. I couldn't exactly say that the Ooboshis were a model family, or even normal in any way. But as far as I could tell, the shadows of the Kohinatas ran deeper than any other family I knew.

"So that's it," Iroha said. "I know what anime and dramas are, but I've not had access to them for a long time. Um, so... You promise you won't tell anyone, right?"

"Not a single soul."

"Cause I'll hate you forever if you do."

"I just said I wouldn't."

I still wanted to be friends with Ozu. Getting on the wrong side of his sister would just make that more difficult. I didn't tend to do stuff that only put me at a disadvantage.

"To tell you the truth..." Iroha lowered her voice, as if to hide her embarrassment. "Living without entertainment was total dullsville. So I made up stories and acted them out. But I had literally no imagination, so I used people I saw and my classmates as a base for my characters. Aha ha ha."

"Oh, so that's why your skit had a stereotypical party animal and a stereotypical introvert in it."

"Y-Yeah... I know it's cringe."

"It's not. Those characters felt so real, and you didn't even have a script. That's *really* impressive."

"Y-You think? Wait, Ooboshi-senpai, are you into drama? It's like you know everything there is to know."

"I'm not into it at all, but my mom does makeup and stuff for actors. When I was younger, she'd sometimes take me to work with

her.”

I had probably been too young to be aware of it at the time, but the memories I had of seeing those professional actors do their work were amazingly vivid, even now. As presumptuous as it sounds, I felt like I got a really solid sense of what first-rate acting truly was.

“You can trust my opinion on this. You’re an outstanding actress.”

“Now I’m *really* embarrassed. I mean, you’re praising me so earnestly...”

“I sure am. You understand how I felt about you complimenting my drawings now?”

“Yeah... It’s like ants crawling through my chest,” Iroha mumbled, her cheeks pinkening.

Before, when she’d bitten my head off, I thought she was nothing more than a standoffish honor student. Looking at her now, though, she was actually pretty adorable. She was good-looking, with a nice body. Surprisingly gorgeous. Adding her extraordinary acting skills into the mix, it wasn’t difficult to imagine her ending up as an actress or idol. I could see her featuring in a manga title too: *My Little Sister Is a Superstar Actress! Or My Childhood Friend Became a Top Idol!*

Yeah, it didn’t make any sense. She was my friend’s little sister, not *my* sister or my friend, and she wasn’t an actress or idol yet either. Such was the harsh bite of reality. Things didn’t *always* turn out in the most entertaining way possible. But there were times when reality could be more convenient than the plot of some manga.

Maybe Iroha wasn’t going to get scouted by the most talented movie director out there.

Maybe her school wasn’t at risk of closing down.

But maybe she didn’t *need* any special impetus like that...

Because she was free to start reaching for her dream at any time.

“Y’know, I bet you’re really good at reading people. That’s how you’re able to act as them so realistically just by observation.”

“Now that you’ve said it, I think you might be right. I never realized it for myself, though.”

“That’s why you can’t break your mom’s trust, and that’s why your relationship with Ozu is so strained. Right?”

“Well... Yeah. I don’t think Ozuma really cares about me. And, honestly? You’re completely right about the mom part too.”

“So you looked outside your family to try and force something to change. You couldn’t help yourself when your delinquent friend invited you to join. You wanted to free yourself of the responsibility to change and have something else force you to do it... Sorry. I still think it’s true, but that probably sounds pretty harsh.”

“No, it’s fine. I think it’s probably true too. And I know it was unreasonable.”

Though she added the quantifier “probably,” it didn’t sound like she was using it as a get-out clause.

There was something Kohinata Iroha didn’t realize about herself. She’d always put a lid on her honest feelings and held back from doing what she’d wanted to. As a result, she’d built up a character, an honor student who did whatever her mom said. A character she’d continued to play up until this day, passing it off as her true self. She couldn’t do anything to contradict that character.

Yet the *real* Kohinata Iroha, sealed deep, deep away inside, had never stopped sending out SOS signals. While keeping to her character, she’d subconsciously been searching for a way to fulfill her true desires. What she needed now was someone to grab her by the hand and force her along the path she’d been looking for.

“I’m your new delinquent gang,” I said.

“Huh?”

“I’m gonna reintroduce you to entertainment, and *force* you to break your mom’s rules. Kohinata Iroha. Are you prepared to put your life in my hands?”

“My *life*? What’s with the sudden dramatics?” she cried.

I could see why it sounded like this came out of nowhere, but in truth, everything I’d put together over the last few weeks had led up to this conclusion.

“You enjoy it, right?”

“Enjoy what?”

“Acting. Playing a character.”

“Well... I guess. I’ve sure done it a ton.”

“Then, don’t you think you should aspire to be an actress?”

“An actress...” Iroha repeated, like the thought had never once crossed her mind.

“This isn’t about emulating Tachibana. This is a dream that belongs to Kohinata Iroha. Does what I’m saying feel right to you?”

“An actress...” Iroha said the word again, then put a thoughtful hand to her chest. She mulled it over for a full five seconds before opening her mouth. “I’ve never really thought about it before, but I *did* feel all fuzzy when you complimented me just now. I think this probably is what I wanna do.”

The real Kohinata Iroha voiced her wish out loud. It was also the very answer I’d been hoping for.

“In that case, I’m gonna build you a place where you can work towards that. Say you’ll make a game with us. You won’t have to help Tachibana with the music. I’ll give you a job that you—and only you—can do.”

“Something only I can do... But you’re making a game. How’s my acting gonna help with that?”

“It couldn’t, right? Not if we’re talking about the sort of game I had you play earlier.”

What we’d made was in the style of a retro game. Back then, there was no culture of voices in video games yet.

“But we *are* gonna need your skills for the game we’re going to make.”

Our game was simply a prototype, so we’d compromised on quality. The game we were going to make going forward needed to be one that would sell—one that would make us money. It was the bare minimum requirement that would allow Otoi to disband Krimzon and return Tachibana and the other delinquents to a path of decency.

For a game like that, having voiced characters was very much a viable option. And if she was only using her voice, Iroha would have plenty of opportunity to gain experience without ever having to show her face.

I was fervent as I explained as much to her, then offered her my hand.

“Will you join us in making our game?”

“Ooboshi-senpai...”

For a second, my outstretched hand remained frozen in the air. I saw a flicker of a shadow flash across Iroha’s face. After everything I’d done to persuade her, and everything she’d told me...she still had doubts?

Perhaps the Kohinata Iroha on the outside, the one who was sensitive to her mom’s feelings and always held back on what she wanted to do, was a much more important role to Iroha than I could ever imagine. I wasn’t sure exactly why—it might have been that Iroha wanted to maintain a good relationship with her mother. If that was the case, then I was a real piece of work. I could be about to snatch something so very precious away from her. But even if I was being cruel, this was necessary for my and Ozu’s future.

This was to make sure our classmates never treated Ozu as an outcast again. This was to keep him away from anyone who might be out to harm him. This was to make sure he could live a trouble-free life, and for that, I needed Iroha to break free of her shell.

I wasn’t doing this for Iroha’s sake. This was to satisfy my ego; to serve my self-interests.

“Um, Ooboshi-senpai?!”

I’d taken her hand for myself. “I’ll make sure your mom never finds out. And if she does, you can say I *made* you help us, and that you never wanted to break your promise to her. So, please!”

Iroha didn’t answer immediately. “Why do you need my help this much? I’m just a stranger to you.”

“It’s because you’re *Ozu’s* sister. I’m not doing this for you.”

“That’s probably the least convincing argument a producer could make.”

A producer...

She had said the word like it was nothing but...I kinda liked it. It hadn’t been my intention to lead anything—that wasn’t what I was after in all of this. But if there was one word that could sum me up right now—my inability to ignore others’ talents, my desire to see those talents bloom, and the arrogance to think I could make it happen—“producer” fit the bill pretty nicely.

“You’re all smiles now,” Iroha said. “But you’re not gonna give up on this halfway through, right?”

“Definitely not. You have my word I’ll see this through to the end, and I’ll continue to support both Ozu and you, his sister,” I told her firmly, looking her straight in the eye.

Promises were all about security, but mine was totally reckless. There was no guarantee I *wouldn’t* throw in the towel—but if I let myself hem and haw, I knew I wouldn’t get through to her.

“Aha ha ha.” Iroha’s laugh sounded half exasperated, and half as though something had snapped inside her. And then, she pouted slightly. “Can you stop that already?”

“Huh?”

“Going on about ‘his sister’ and ‘Ozu’s sister.’ It’s weird to keep pointing that out. And you keep just saying ‘you’ too. I dunno if you’ve even called me by name *once*.”

“Y’know, you might have a point...”

It was a bit weird, but there was a reason I’d been avoiding—subconsciously, I think—using her name to her face.

“If I was gonna call you by name, it’d be Kohinata. But that doesn’t feel right, ’cause it’s what I called Ozu before we were friends.”

“You can use my first name, then.”

“Your first name... So, Iroha-san?”

“You’re my senpai, and you’re gonna throw a ‘-san’ in there? Gross. You can take that part off.”

“...Iroha?”

“Yep.” She nodded.

Was she serious? This was a way bigger deal than she was acting like it was—because I’d rarely had any experiences of being close to girls. Meaning I’d rarely been close enough to them to be on a first-name basis.

I’d only been calling Iroha “Iroha” in my head to distinguish her from Ozu. Calling her by that name *out loud* was on a whole other level. Then there were Tachibana and Otoi, both girls who I referred to by their last names.

In Otoi's case, I still didn't even *know* what her first name was. Seeing as we were fake-dating, I felt like I should know, so I had tried to look it up in our class register—only to have her snatch it out of my hands. No idea what was going on there.

The point was, calling a girl by her first name without an honorific was too much of a challenge for me.

"Repeat after me. Iroha."

"I-Iroha."

"Without stuttering, if you please. Iroha."

"Did you get a personality transplant in the last five seconds or something?"

That, or she was pushier than I'd thought she was. She didn't *have* to suppress her true emotions anymore, but I was suddenly worried that the personality she'd been hiding underneath might be more than I'd bargained for. I *might* just have opened Pandora's box over here...

"Did you get a personality transplant in the last five seconds or something, *Iroha*?"

She seriously wasn't going to back down, huh?

I took a quick breath to prepare myself, and then I went for it.

"Iroha."

"You got it! Looking forward to working with you, Ooboshisenpai!"

And that was how I formed a secret relationship with my friend's little sister—with Iroha.

"And that is the heartwarming story of how we got here."

"I can't believe this... You're a sleazeball..."

"Wh-What's wrong, Mashiro? I didn't do anything *that* shitty, did I? I mean, sure, I might've gone overboard forcing Iroha to work with us, and it *was* a decision based on the cringe naivete typical of junior high students, but still..."

"That's not my problem with it."

"Huh?"

"You were talking like you'd never called a girl by her first name before, and without an honorific... That means you totally forgot about me, right?"

"Uh... Aaah!"

"See?! That reaction means you *just* remembered! You're a sleazeball! A lowlife! Literally, go die in a fire!"

"Wait, hold on a second. You're my childhood friend and my cousin! You shouldn't count!"

"I'm a girl, same as any other. And you do and *did* call me by my first name, without any honorific. You forgot all about me... You know

samurai were allowed to kill people for offending their honor, right? It's a shame time has moved on, frankly."

"Come on now, this all happened right around the time we fell out of contact!"

"I don't wanna hear any excuses. You're scum, trash, and you deserve to die. I'm done with you."

"H-Hey, don't go on your phone. I haven't finished my story."

"Don't care. I've got writing to do."

"*Here?!?*"

"I feel like crap. I don't wanna hear any more. I'm writing to forget."

"Writing to forget?! That's not a thing!"

"People drink to forget when something bad happens, right? It's the same thing, but with writing. All this ickiness I'm feeling is going straight...into...my story!"

"Th-This is how Makigai Namako-sensei's dark story writing comes together?! So *this* is how you create your masterpieces!"

"Hmph! I hope you get eaten by sea monsters."

"Okay, so you wanna write. Shall we get off the Ferris wheel, then? You don't wanna hear my story anyway, so we might as well go somewhere where you can focus more—"

"No. I don't wanna get off. Keep talking."

"Huh? I thought you said you didn't wanna hear it?"

"I'm gonna write. You talk to yourself."

"Are you getting off on this or something?!"

Chapter 6: My Friend's Little Sister and I Have a Secret

More than half a year had passed since I agreed to call Iroha by her first name. Spring came around, and with it, a new school semester. Ozu, Otoi, and I were now in our third and final year.

I didn't gloss over those months because they were uneventful; it was the opposite. I had been putting together plans for our game, laying down the groundwork to allow Krimzon's members to move on, and coaching Iroha in her acting.

All pretty simple stuff that didn't warrant going into too much detail. I was taking everything nice and slowly, one step at a time, but it seemed to go by in a flash.

After the school assembly that kicked off the semester, Otoi asked Iroha and me to come over to her place.

"Sup, guys. Thanks for comin'."

"Hey. Say, Otoi, you could've at least come to school for the first day."

Otoi chuckled. "You're kiddin', right? Nothin' happens on the first day. It's the *best* day to skip."

"You shouldn't actually be skipping any days at all."

"That's Aki for you, always obsessin' over the little stuff. Doesn't mean we're gonna listen to him, right, Kohinata?"

"R-Right! You really could stand to loosen up a little, Ooboshi-senpai."

"Whose side are you on, Iroha? I'm your *producer*, remember?"

"Sure, but Otoi-san's got this authoritative air about her. More than you, at least."

"It sucks that you're so right."

During the days I'd skipped over, Iroha and Otoi had met in person for the first time. Iroha had been very nervous to meet the leader of a delinquent gang for the first time. When they actually talked and Otoi turned out to be laid-back and spoke like some country bumpkin, Iroha instantly relaxed. Now they were able to converse like they had a comfortable senpai-kouhai relationship.

"Anyway, since you asked us to come over... I'm guessing it's done?" I said.

"It sure is. The Otoi Studio is ready for business."

"Yeah! At last!" This was excellent news. I swept my gaze over

Otoi's traditional garden. I'd been expecting an additional building somewhere, but there was nothing like that. "Uh, where is it?"

"Over there." Otoi pointed...at a simple storehouse.

She led us over to it and opened its heavy iron door. A peculiar scent came wafting out from within. The sunlight lit up the dim space inside, giving us a clear view of what was there. That was when I spotted the stairs leading down.

"Looks like you've built a dungeon," I said. "Is the studio down there, then?"

"Sure is. Bein' underground makes it perfectly soundproof."

"Good point. I didn't think of that. I just never expected you to build it underground."

"I got my grandpa and grandma on my side. Got a huge advance on my inheritance."

"Seriously?! That's like the gamble of a lifetime..."

"Quit talkin' like it's just my problem. You're half the reason I'm makin' this gamble."

"Can't argue with that..."

The sound studio Otoi had built was for recording Iroha's voice lines, and to give the musical members of Krimzon—like Tachibana—somewhere to record their compositions. Both of those things were connected to the game I suggested we make. At the end of the day, though, it was Otoi who had built this thing in order to support the musical ambitions of her gang, and she'd apparently been planning this long before I came along. It probably would have happened even if I hadn't come forward with my own ideas.

But even if it wasn't solely for my sake, I was truly grateful to Otoi for making it. Game development was expensive. Even if we were able to take care of the planning, programming, soundtrack, sound effects, and voice acting for ourselves, the art and writing would need to be outsourced to more capable people.

No one was going to buy a game with my crappy drawings, and trying to write the scenario for our demo broke me. Writing in grammatically correct Japanese was not a problem. My struggle was when it came to worldbuilding, characters, and dialogue. They all came out so flat... Writing is hard.

That was why I needed to contract someone over the internet—which meant spending money. Even if I cut back on spending from my monthly allowance and scraped together as much as I could, using as much as a hundred thousand or even two hundred thousand yen on a recording studio for each game we made would wipe out our funds fast. And who knows how many millions of yen it would come to if I rented a studio regularly to use for Iroha's coaching?

Hence why Otoi's having this place built out of her own pocket,

and the fact that she was letting us use it for free, was a total godsend. And Otoi was the god who had sent it.

Well.

"It feels awkward just calling you 'Otoi' at this point. Maybe I ought to go for Otoi-san," I said.

"Call me whatever y'want. 'Nless it's my full name."

"Oh yeah... Speaking of, Otoi—Otoi-san—what is your first name?"

"You're a real pain in the ass, y'know that?"

"What did I do?!"

She'd given me that exact same reaction before, and I still didn't understand why asking for her name made her look at me like she wanted me dead.

"Y'know, Ooboshi-senpai, it's kinda like you're funding your dreams with Otoi-san's money. Like you're her gigolo or something."

"Way to describe it in the worst possible way, Iroha. And you know we're not—"

"—actually dating. Yeah, I know."

"So stop insinuating things about us."

"Aha ha ha!"

It wasn't anything new anymore for Iroha to come out with stuff like that. Most of the time she was her usual, serious self, but now and then she'd say something strangely mean, often resulting in my embarrassment. I should probably just have been grateful that she wasn't as much of an annoying bully as Tachibana.

Otoi-san led us down the stairs into the underground studio.

"Whoa..." I gasped.

"Oh my gosh! This is the real deal!" Iroha's eyes were sparkling.

Right out of the stairs, there was a spacious reception area. It had a table and chairs, and a shelf stacked with boxes of candy (the most conspicuous one was tower-shaped with Suckies sticking out of it), different kinds of tea, coffee beans, and other ingredients for drinks.

There was a guy with a mohawk in one of the chairs studying a sheet of music. When he noticed he had company, he looked up and offered us a friendly, "'Sup!"

A thick, soundproof door had been left open—past there was the control room. It was packed with a ton of different equipment I couldn't name but could tell was legit, and it excited my boyish nature in the same way cars and robots did.

"You know how to use all this stuff?" I asked Otoi-san. "'Cause I don't have a clue."

"Eh, I play around with sound as a hobby sometimes, so yeah."

Flumping down into the engineer's chair, Otoi-san brought the PC out of sleep. She must've been in the middle of editing a recent recording,

because the huge monitor was filled with wavy lines. “There’s a ton of stuff here I’ve never used, but I’m sure I’ll learn once I play with it some.”

“Learn by doing, huh?”

That reminded me of how I’d familiarized myself with graphics software and text editors over the past six months. Not only that, but I’d even learned to more or less read the code Ozu was writing, even if there was no way I’d ever understand all of it. I wasn’t working on it directly, of course, so I mean that superficially, but still.

“Is it okay to take a look at the booth?” Iroha asked.

“Course. ’Sway more important for *you* than anythin’ else in *here*, after all.”

“Thank you!” With a polite bob of her head and cheeks flushed light pink with excitement, Iroha scampered off to the recording booth at the far end of the studio.

I followed her. The booth itself was nice and big. Looking around, I could see microphones and sound-absorbing material, as well as lights, cameras, and speakers placed on the ceiling. There was also something I couldn’t figure out a use for, but my best guess was that it reduced echo or something. It wasn’t a very confident guess, though.

Iroha stepped up to the mic timidly, before glancing at Otoi-san in the control room. The look was a very obvious request to try it out.



There was a transparent glass screen between the booth and the control room, allowing Otoi-san to catch Iroha's eye. She nodded.

"Ah. Ah. Ah. Can you hear me, Otoi-san?"

"Yup. Perfectly." Otoi-san's voice came through the speakers on the ceiling.

"Wow. That's how you communicate between the booth and the control room," Iroha said.

"If you're recordin' alone, I'll get you to wear headphones, 'n' my voice'll come through 'em. The speakers are only really for if a big group's recordin' together."

"Huh, I didn't even think of that," I said.

That explained the booth's multiple microphones and the couch pushed up next to the wall. It also reminded me of when I was looking up how voice actors recorded their lines. It was usually done either individually or in groups. The latter was when several actors gathered in one room and performed their lines one after another so they could adapt the delivery in response to their co-actors. That was usually how anime and drama CDs were recorded.

Individual recording was when the actors recorded their lines in separate sessions, and those lines then got edited and inserted into the final product. This was often the case for games, but also sometimes for anime. For example, when it was difficult to get all the actors together because of their schedules, or in response to measures meant to prevent the spread of an infectious disease.

"You're probably not gonna have any sessions with other people, Kohinata," Otoi-san said. "Unless I'm missin' somethin'?"

"No, that's how we wanna play it, considering the circumstances," I replied.

"Y'don't want your parents findin' out, yeah? Y'still keepin' it from Ozu too?"

"Yeah," I said.

I'd told Ozu that Iroha had refused to work with us. At the same time, I'd said that I was introducing Iroha to entertainment behind her mom's back, and that she understood what our game development efforts were all about, so she had no hard feelings about them.

From what Iroha had said, I had the sense that her mom was less anxious about her kids interacting with entertainment in general, and more anxious about them being *influenced* by it—for example, by getting into acting or mimicking characters. In which case, if she only found out that Iroha was consuming content and nothing more, we could avoid the worst-case scenario.

What we absolutely *couldn't* let Iroha's mom find out about was the voice acting. I wasn't exactly thrilled about keeping secrets from

my friend, but since Ozu was Iroha's brother, it was safer not to let him in on this.

This was a secret between me and my friend's little sister, Iroha.

Well, strictly speaking, Otoi-san, Tachibana, and the few members of Krimzon who often hung out around the studio all knew too. They were former delinquents, though, so when their ex-leader told them not to tell a soul, on pain of death, they listened.

"I'm sorry for causing such a fuss," Iroha said. "It's not just you either... So many people are going out of their way for my sake."

Otoi-san chuckled gently. "Don't sweat it. I was always gonna make this studio." She always gave off this sense like she couldn't be bothered with anything, but at times like this, she really showed her worth as an ally. "Nyway. Aki. Whaddya wanna do 'bout the voice actors apart from Kohinata? Gonna scour the internet for 'em? You'll hafta mention we're doin' the recordings individually."

"No need. Iroha's gonna do *all* the voices."

"Mm'kay, but have y'really thought 'bout that? There's gotta be a limit to what her voice can do. Like, what 'bout the male characters?"

"Yeah, those things crossed my mind before. I'm not worried about them now, though."

"Hm?" Otoi-san blinked at me, confused.

I turned back to Iroha.

Caught off guard, she straightened her back, then shot me a nervous smile. "I'm ready to go whenever. Just say the word."

"Right. I want you to show Otoi-san what you can do."

"O-Okay. Um, Otoi-san. I'm sorry to ask this out of the blue, but is it okay if we do some recording right now?"

"Gotcha. Sure thing." Otoi-san must have picked up on the hint of challenge that lay within Iroha's question. A belligerent smile rose to her lips. "Show me what you got."

It wasn't like Iroha and I had been sitting on our hands these past six months, just waiting for the studio to be completed. We'd put in as much work as we could, considering we were amateurs, and as a result...

...Kohinata Iroha's talents had really started to shine.

Let's go back six months, to the week after I first started supporting Iroha in her acting ambitions.

One day after school, I called Iroha over to my place through LIME (we'd only just exchanged IDs).

She came as asked, being sneaky about it so Ozu wouldn't find out. This was the first thing she said when she saw me:

"I *knew* you were just in this for my body."

“Hold on. Where did *that* come from?”

She’d wasted no time at all in insulting me by questioning my intentions. It wasn’t just that either—she was glaring at me like she didn’t trust me one iota.

Stop that, please.

“You agree to become my producer, then invite me to your place only a few days later. Usually that means something filthy is about to go down!”

“How do *you* know about that trope?! Aren’t you supposed to be banned from all forms of entertainment?”

“Ever since I became friends with Tachibana-san, she’s been letting me read manga on her phone.”

“That girl has a lot to answer for... Look, nowadays people get called out way more often for getting up to shady nonsense. The ‘filthy’ stuff you’re talking about isn’t so common in real life anymore.”

“It’s not common for junior high students to make a video game in real life either. If something as unusual as *that* can happen, who knows what’s gonna come next?”

“Grk! If you wanna come at me with facts and logic, at least make it so I can refute them!”

Still, it was smart of her to be wary around guys. There were definitely some out there who would take advantage of her if given the chance. It’d just be nice if she could stop being wary around *me*, because frankly, it was getting old fast.

“I’m not locking any doors, and I’m not gonna stop you using your phone,” I said. “The second I do anything sketchy, you’re free to call the police. Just come in for now.”

“Okay. If you insist.”

I stepped back to create enough distance between us to not spook her, and showed her to the living room. It wasn’t like I had planned to invite a girl into my bedroom to start with, but Iroha’s guardedness only vindicated my instincts. I had already moved a number of books from my bedroom to the living room table.

“Sit wherever’s comfortable. Want a drink?”

“Considering you might spike it, no thanks.”

“‘No thanks’ would’ve been enough. I would’ve appreciated it if you’d kept the rest to yourself.” I sighed and started preparing a drink for myself, pulling out a bottle of tomato juice from the fridge and pouring it into my favorite glass.

My parents loved tomato juice and would buy it online regularly. It wasn’t something you would find at any old convenience store or supermarket. I drank it a lot too, just because it was there. I got so used to the taste, I kept buying it every month even though my

parents had gone abroad.

I returned to the table with tomato juice in hand.

Iroha had settled down in a chair and was now staring at the books on the table. "What are these, Ooboshi-senpai?"

"Take a look at the titles. They're all books I thought would be useful for your acting."

"Thought so. Wait, did you buy them?"

"Yeah. You couldn't use your allowance on them, right? Wouldn't be able to keep them at your place either."

"I don't think mom'd find them if I just hid them in my room."

"Oh, she would. Trust me. She would."

"Wh-Why so serious?"

"You apparently don't know this, but what we call a 'mother' is actually a terrifying creature. Listen well. As every guy across the country knows, it doesn't matter how clever your hiding place is—under the bed, or behind a bookshelf—your mom is *definitely* gonna find out about it."

"Huh. Really?" Iroha looked totally unconvinced. It was probably a good thing she didn't know what I was talking about. "But yeah, I guess it would be kinda risky keeping this stuff in the house. Mom's barely at home, but I feel like that'd just make me careless and it'd be *more* likely she'd find them."

"Right? That's why I think it's best we keep these books and anything else you might need for acting at my place."

"Oh, I see. So you can have an excuse to invite me over on the regular?"

"It's not an *excuse*. I know how misleading it's gonna look if someone sees you constantly coming over. I'm only doing it because I think it's absolutely necessary."

"Hmm. Fair." Iroha narrowed her eyes a little, as though she didn't quite believe me. But the next second, she looked away. "I'm sorry. I dunno why I'm being all doubtful when you're doing all this stuff for me."

"I-It's cool. Um, it's important for a girl your age to have her wits about her." I couldn't get mad at her if she was going to go all docile on me.

Iroha could really throw me off when she went full honor student—by which I mean when she acted all pure and feminine like this. Ah, but we weren't allowed to have *that* kind of relationship. I couldn't deny Iroha was an attractive girl, but our relationship right now was one built solely on trust, and we couldn't afford any mistakes.

I had decided that there would be a clear emotional line that I would not cross, all so Iroha wouldn't have to be wary and would feel free to entrust me with her time.

That was how Iroha and I started our secret sessions together.

Sometimes we would practice vocalizing, taking advice from the books I'd bought.

"Aah. Aah. Aah. Aah. Aah. Y'know, I don't see how this is gonna improve my acting in any way. Do I really have to do it?"

"Of course you do. The resonance of your vocal cords is the basis for *everything*. You need to practice using them properly till it's second nature! According to the book, at least..."

"Hmm. Okay, you practice with me, Ooboshi-senpai."

"Huh? Why me?"

"I don't wanna be the only one to have wasted my time if it turns out to be pointless. I want you to do it too, so you can figure out for yourself if it actually works."

"That's a fair point. I'll probably be more confident putting together a training plan if I've tried these exercises out first."

"Together, then. Aah. Aah. Aah. Aah. Aah."

"Aah. Aah. Aah. Aah. Aah."

Sometimes we'd work on Iroha's acting technique by referencing commentary videos made by current actresses.

"When you're acting, you shouldn't be *trying* to express emotion.' What does she mean by that, Ooboshi-senpai?"

"She didn't really explain enough, so I'm not too sure. Hm. Let's see if I can find anyone who's gone into something similar... Ah, here's one."

"Show me too! Okay, lemme see... 'Human emotions are never fixed, but are in a state of continuous flux. If you prepare the emotions you need for your character before the scene even begins, you'll lose them long before you need them, making your whole performance unnatural.' I get it now..."

"You totally don't get it, do you?"

"It's obvious, huh?"

"Anger is anger, but real people feel anger at different levels, right? It starts with low levels of irritation that build and build, and then a tiny thing pushes them over the edge and makes them explode in a burst of rage. People don't just start at zero anger and then go right to a hundred."

"Oh! So if you're prepared to be angry beforehand and begin at level one hundred, it's like a false start, so when the time comes you're *supposed* to be at a hundred, your anger levels have fallen to like, fifty or something. That sound right?"

"Yeah. I guess that means it's best to go in neutral, and be as relaxed as you'd normally be."

“That makes sense!”

“For you, though, Iroha, it might work better if you forget about all of this.”

“Meaning?”

“Take a look at this video. It talks about becoming your character. If you master this technique, you’ll be able to perfectly sync your mind with your character’s whenever you need to, even *before* they enter the scene. I think this method would suit you better.”

“It sounds tough...”

“Actually, I think you already kinda do this.”

“I’ve never put any thought into my acting before, so I’m kinda scared it’s all gonna leave me at some point.”

“We can prevent that by putting into words what it is you *actually* do. It helps that we live in an age where we have unlimited access to the knowledge of those who went before you.”

“Yeah... Okay! I’ll do my best!”

Sometimes we’d sit in the living room and watch a movie on the TV together.

“Waaah! Thank God it had a happy ending!”

“Yeah, the pacing and everything of the story was really great. The foreshadowing and the payoff, the way the old axe was shown at every opportunity to create an allegory...”

“And they kept talking about how they’d never meet again in the second half... I couldn’t take it! I had to cry!”

“The acting was really good too. It was so realistic, it made me feel like the world actually exists. Shame about that one guy who kept reading his lines in monotone.”

“And the action during the climax was so intense! My heart was tying itself up in knots!”

“The only thing that sorta ruined it was that teenage girl waving that giant axe around. It’d be fine if this were a fantasy film, but it’s trying to play itself off as modern and realistic, so...”

“...”

“...”

“You sure know how to suck the fun outta movies, Ooboshi-senpai!”

“*You* need to employ your brain a bit and learn something instead of just watching to be entertained.”

“Gimme a break! It was the first time I was seeing it!”

Sometimes we’d watch anime with the sound down, and do a live dub.

“Doing this makes me feel like a phony. I swear I’m really trying

to get into character.”

“It’s ‘cause you’re seeing the finished product, with other actors providing the voices. It’s bound to feel weird to replace their voices with your own.”

“How can I make it sound more natural?”

“I don’t think you have to worry about that. If you think too hard about the characters’ original voices, you won’t be acting; you’ll be mimicking.”

“Oh... Oh, yeah.”

“How about we stop watching the anime, and you read the manga instead? Over and over, up to the latest volume.”

“What’d be the point in that?”

“So you can interpret the characters in your own way. Then you can think about how *you’d* portray them, do some prep, and then we can try the dubbing again. You won’t have seen the latest anime episode, so we can have you go full improv. I’ll write out the lines for you beforehand.”

“And what would *that* achieve?”

“You don’t get it? You could forget about the original voice, and act out the role like it’s *yours*.”

“Oh!”

Iroha and I spent our time like that almost every day. And now, Kohinata Iroha had truly come into her own.

And now back to six months later: the first day of school was over and we were in Otoi-san’s recording studio. Iroha was in the booth, and Otoi-san and I were on the other side of the glass in the control room. Iroha was done with her lines and now sat with the practice script on her lap, sighing as though she were glad it was over.

I secretly curled up my fist by my side. There was no way Otoi-san *wouldn’t* be impressed. I glanced her way.

Otoi-san leaned back in her chair and let out a long breath of air. The lollipop stick in her mouth wiggled up and down. “Man... That was actually better than I expected.” She sounded like she’d been blown away.

Needless to say, I had a smug grin on my face. “Right? Heh.”

“What’re you grinnin’ about?”

“I’m her exclusive manager—her producer, if you will. You could say I molded her into what she is today. Uh... I mean, I guess you couldn’t really, seeing as she was talented to begin with.”

“I dunno if it’s normal to go from max smug to zero so quickly. Not that I’d know.”

"All I want is for you to know I played a small part in this." I didn't want to take all the credit—but I didn't want to rid myself of *all* of it either. How's that for average? "I'm impressed you can tell how talented she is from a single recording. I'm guessing you know your stuff about acting then, and not just music?"

"Nope. Haven't got a clue."

"So when you said she was better than you expected, it didn't actually mean anything?"

"Also not true. I dunno 'bout actin', but I know 'bout *sound*."

"Sound?"

"Yup. This's probably got nothin' to do with her actin' ability, but her *voice* comes out real clear."

"Clear... I'm not really sure what that means, though I'm guessing it's a good thing."

"Sall 'bout sound quality. I probably pick up on this stuff 'cause of my decent upbringing."

"What's *that* got to do with it?"

I could see how upbringing might be involved if she could play the piano or had perfect pitch, but as far as I knew, nothing like that applied to Otoi-san.

"Lots. I live in an old, traditional Japanese house, yeah? 'Sbeen around since my grandpa's grandpa's time."

"Ah, that explains why it's so worn everywhere."

"Exactly. 'N' I know how I come off, but me 'n' my grandpa are actually pretty close."

"Ah, that explains why you're... Actually, scratch that."

"Like an old lady?"

"Th-That is so far from what I was gonna say!" I lied. Though the fact she could read my mind just made her even *more* like an old lady.

"Nyway."

"M-Mm?"

"Gramps's always taken me to all kinda performances, ever since I was little. Singers, orchestras, kabuki, Takarazuka... Everythin' y'can call 'traditional' 'n' that happens on a stage, I've seen."

"Damn. You make it sound like it's no big deal, but that's really something."

"I know I'm lucky. 'Swhere my ear for sound comes from." Otoi-san let out a short, loud laugh. I doubted there were many Japanese teenagers who could claim the same experiences as her. "Leavin' my life story outta it for a sec, my razor-sharp ears tell me Kohinata's voice is beautifully clear. It's somethin' *real* special."

"Special..."

"Aki? Y'good? What're y'starin' at the floor for? Are y'shakin'?"

"S-Special... *Special*..."

“Aki?” Otoi-san peered at me, uncharacteristically confused. Even the look on her face amused me, strengthening the emotion that was welling up inside.

“Right! Special! You think so too, don’t you, Otoi-san?!”

“Y-Yeah.”

I grabbed Otoi-san’s hand in a flurry of excitement and started shaking it up and down.

“Y’don’t usually get this riled up. Where’s this comin’ from?”

“This whole time, I’ve never had anyone else to share Iroha’s talent with. No one else to talk about it with...”

“Oh.”

Ozu was my only friend. Since we’d been keeping it from him, I’d had no one to discuss Iroha’s acting—or, I guess, voice acting—with at all. Anyone would react like this if they found someone who was into the same idol. And “anyone” included me.

“Will you let me gush over Iroha to you now and then?” I asked.

“I’m good, thanks.”

“Come on!”

“Can’t be bothered. I’m more the type to obsess in my own time ‘n’ by myself.”

“Urgh. That’s so you, and so very disappointing.”

“Also, I’m lettin’ you record your stuff for the game in my studio for free, *and* I’m gonna be doin’ the editin’ for free as well. Y’really gonna ask me for more? That’d make you the ultimate moocher.”

“Guh! That’s totally fair... There’s no arguing with that...”

We *needed* Otoi-san’s help, or our project was dead in the water. If I hoped to get anything else from her, I’d definitely need to pay her back in some way. According to my mental database of manga-acquired knowledge, the best way to get her on my side was to bribe her with her favorite food.

“What if I bought you more Suckies?” I offered.

“Rejected. I buy plenty online every month from the internet already.”

“Nrk. That’s exactly what I do with my tomato juice. Copycat...”

“Good luck tryin’ to bribe me with money or anythin’ physical. I’m rich. Anythin’ I want, I can just buy for myself.”

Again with the perfect logic.

“What *can* I do, then?”

“Beats me.” Otoi-san plucked the now candyless stick from between her lips, tossed it in the trash, then grabbed a new Suckie from the stand on the table. She tore off the wrapper and put the stick in her mouth. She definitely had plenty in stock.

Think...

Otoi-san loved Suckies. *Why* did she like them? Was it because it

gave her something to occupy her mouth?

I guess that's part of it, but is that all of it?

What if the other part was that she just liked sweets? That would make sense.

Anything she wanted, she could buy with money, she said. But was that really true? Otoi-san was lazy and hated effort. Maybe there was a hint hidden in that personality of hers.

“Ah! I got it!”

“Hm?”

“How about I buy you sweets from a fancy store? Sweets you can't buy online?”

“Oooh...”

The moment I saw Otoi-san's eyes flicker with interest, I struck a victory pose. “It's a pain having to go all that way to buy them yourself, right? Lemme buy them for you. It can act as payment for letting us use the studio, and for letting me gush to you about Iroha.”

“Okay, okay, y'win. It's a deal.”

“Wow. You didn't even try to haggle...”

Swift decision-making was usually seen as a virtue, but in her case, I bet it was because she was too lazy to think about it too hard. Not that I was about to complain when I was benefiting from it.

As Otoi-san and I conducted our secret negotiations, Iroha emerged from the recording booth.

“Thanks for letting me borrow your pencil case, Otoi-san,” she said.

“Sure. Just stick it over there somewhere.”

“Kay.”

Iroha put the pencil case on the table. It was important she be able to write impromptu notes on her script or make changes to it in response to the sound director's feedback. Stationery was indispensable when it came to recording.

“How was my performance?” Iroha's voice was a little shrill, and her eyes were darting around all over the place.

Either it was because she'd just stepped out of character, or it was because she was still excited from having her first-ever studio recording. Her face was covered in sweat. Air conditioning tended to be switched off during recording to avoid picking up the sound. It also took a lot of energy to bring a voice out from the very depths of your body, so sweat was a given. It was also a testament to how much Iroha had put into the performance.

“You were fantastic. Here.” I passed Iroha a hand towel.

“Oh. Thanks.” She took it and wiped her face. It reminded me of a dog getting its face dried after going out in the rain, and I couldn't help but chuckle. “Hm? What is it, Ooboshi-senpai?”

“Ah, nothing. You really gave it your all, huh?”

“Of course I did—I was being recorded. But...this is the first time I’ve acted in front of anyone that’s not you, and I really wanna know what Otoi-san thinks. Especially since she’s the one letting us use the studio. *That* made me kinda nervous.”

Otoi-san chuckled. “Hey, I’d letcha use it even if y’were the lousiest actress in the world. Probably.” Seeing as it was Otoi-san, the “probably” pretty much decimated everything that came before it. “But you *were* good. Your talent really came through in your voice.”

“Really?!”

“Yup. I can tell you’ve got the skill I haven’t.” Otoi-san paused before continuing, “Just like Asagi ’n’ the others.”

“You’re...comparing me to Tachibana-san?”

“Yeah. ’Swwhy I wanted to support their music in the first place; I knew they could make it to places I couldn’t even dream of.”

“Don’t *you* have any dreams like that, Otoi-san?”

“If I did, I could never achieve ’em. I’ve got an ear for music, see. That’s how I know anythin’ I make sucks.”

Unable to form a response herself, Iroha shot me a troubled glance. Trouble was, I wasn’t sure what to say either, outside of being totally honest.

“I know exactly how you feel,” I said.

“Y’do?”

“Uh-huh. Though I wouldn’t if you’d asked me six months ago.”

I’d built up a ton of experience over this past year. I had studied drama, helped Iroha with her training, and even stepped (poorly) into roles myself to give her a practice partner. I had brainstormed ideas for our game with Ozu, put together specification documents, and helped build up the framework for it. I had brushed up on the basics of storytelling so I’d be able to distinguish between good and bad scenarios, and held heated meetings with writers I was hoping to contract. I had brushed up on the basics of illustration so I’d be able to distinguish, etc. I had brushed up on the basics of UI, so I’d etc.

Basically, I’d done a ton of research and spoken to the people whose entire lives revolved around their craft, and come to one simple conclusion:

I could *never* hope to achieve what they had.

No matter how much effort I put in, my results would never amount to anything above average. I wasn’t the kind of genius who, someday, would be able to butt heads with other creatives.

I was sure Otoi-san and I had traveled the same road and reached the same conclusion.

“You’ve chosen to support other people in their talents instead, right? I know *exactly* how you feel,” I said.

“Yup. You ‘n’ me get each other, Aki.”

I laughed. “Strangely, I feel like we’ve formed a kind of connection.”

“They call that ‘cut from the same cloth,’ yeah? Not that I’d know.”

My bond with Otoi-san was deepening before our very eyes. It wasn’t quite the same as falling for each other. It was more like a strange sense of sympathy.

Iroha was giving us a hard stare.

“Oh, sorry, Iroha. I guess we went a little too crazy over the managing side of things...”

“Oh, don’t worry about me. It’s just wonderful to see you two getting along. I wouldn’t want to get in your way.” Iroha held out the palms of her hands like she was offering us something. “But, I *do* think it’s kinda weird how Ooboshi-senpai’s calling you Otoi-*san*, seeing as you’re apparently so close.”

“I’m used to it. I dunno what her first name is anyway.”

Whenever I’d tried asking, I had only made Otoi-san grumpy. Either she thought it would be *too* familiar for me to use it, or she really hated her name.

“She calls you Aki. You should call her Reiku. That’ll make you even closer, and...huh?” Iroha had been chattering like nothing was wrong, but stopped when the air tensed up.

Time had come to a stop. Otoi-san’s eyes had glazed over.

Mine too, for a different reason. I could remember seeing the kanji for her name in the class register and thinking they were cool, but I had quickly forgotten what they were. Reiku, though, with the characters for “lovely” and “crimson”—those were *awesome*.

“Kohinata. Where did you learn that?”

“Learn what?”

“My name.”

“Oh, it was on the pencil case you lent me just now.” Iroha pointed at the pencil case in question. “Otoi Reiku.”

“Shut up a sec.” Otoi-san grabbed Iroha by the shoulder in a highly threatening and terrifying manner. She reminded me of a delinquent. Wait, I mean she *was* a delinquent. Used to be, at least. “I hate bein’ called by my first name.”

“Why? It’s a great name,” Iroha said.

“Who cares why?”

“Lovely crimson. I think it sounds wonderful.”

“I’ve got the patience of a saint, but even that’s gonna run out eventually.”

“Eep.” Iroha had pressed on, apparently unaware of Otoi-san’s growing aura of darkness, until it became too big for even her to

ignore. Now she looked scared.

“Delete that info from your memory and just call me ‘Otoi-san,’ ‘kay?”

“O-Okay.” Iroha nodded frantically. With that, the power dynamic in their relationship had become clear. Delinquent or not, it looked like Otoi-san was using fear and power to dominate Iroha... I decided it was probably best to pretend I hadn’t noticed.

Why *did* Otoi-san hate her first name anyway? Otoi Reiku. It *was* a great name, and it suited her. It was both powerful and elegant.

I just couldn’t figure it out.

Though that small hiccup threatened to derail things, in the end we came away a band of three accomplices in on the same secret.

It was a secret we would carry with us for a long time, working together as partners. At the time, I wasn’t thinking so much about the future; I was just satisfied we could carry out our activities in the here and now.

“Oh! Yeah, that’s right! I just remembered Otoi-san’s name! Reiku. It’s Reiku. Otoi Reiku. I never actually used it, so I totally forgot!”

“I can *definitely* see why Otoi-san doesn’t want anyone to know...”

“Actually, after all this time, I still think it’s a great name. How come she hates it?”

“Are you serious, Aki?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Ugh. I swear he’s got, like, zero IQ. How can he *not* see that it sounds like *otoire iku*...to go to the toilet...?”

“What are you muttering about?”

“I’m just gonna pretend I didn’t pick up on it, for the sake of Otoi-san’s dignity. Wait... We’re supposed to be spilling our secrets to each other right now... But now it feels like I’ve got an extra one I’m going to have to keep from him when we get off this thing...”

“She’s *still* muttering and staring out the window... What’s gotten into her?”

Chapter 7: My Friend's Little Sister Is Close to Me

I stood up the second the bell for the end of school chimed and our homeroom teacher dismissed us.

Ozu—who was in my class again this year—picked up on my impatience. “You off to see Iroha again?”

“Yeah. We’ve got plans.”

“Just like every other day, lately. She’s been going over to your place, right?”

“Getting involved with Krimzon means she’s lost a lot of her free time. I wanna at least give her the chance to experience entertainment when she can. Secretly, of course.”

“I got you.”

Though I studied Ozu’s expression carefully, it was too robotic for me to work out if he knew I was lying or not. I simultaneously had the sense he had seen through *everything*, and that he wasn’t even bothered to think too hard about it in the first place.

Either was fine. I wasn’t going to sell Iroha out either way. If I had to lie and lie until the cows came home, that’d be what I’d do.

“Oh, right,” Ozu said. “Before I go, there’s something I gotta tell you. I finished checking over the scenario and art.”

“Already? I only asked you yesterday. Nice one, Ozu.”

“I had some spare time between classes.”

“Perfect efficiency. Is there anything sweeter?”

Since project planning was one of my roles, ordering the scenario, artwork, and other extra pieces was my job. In the end, though, a game couldn’t function without all the programming that went into it, so it was important to have the programmer check over the outsourced work to make sure there weren’t any problems.

In terms of the scenario, for example, it had to be workable in the game’s framework, and any flags needed to be properly implemented. Meanwhile, the artwork needed to be of a resolution that would work within the expected game environment, and if any of the designs would end up as 3D models, they had to be simple enough not to cause lag.

The game we were hoping to make would be an escape room-style game with charming characters that could be played on a smartphone. That last point was the most important. The variation in phone models

was greater than that for PCs or consoles; it was harder to test for phones, especially when it came to figuring out how much of a device's processing power would be dedicated to the game. The game's processes, therefore, had to be fine-tuned as tightly as possible. There were so many mobile games out there that went straight into maintenance on release—it wasn't realistic to expect ours to be an exception.

Though I felt bad for giving Ozu even *more* work to do, I needed his feedback as the engineer on the project.

"Thanks, Ozu. Could I get you to focus on the server stuff next?"

"Sure, I'll get on that. See you later."

"See ya."

Our exchange was short, but it wasn't for lack of caring. It was just how our friendship was.

Ozu hurried from the classroom, apparently eager to get home and start tinkering with his programming as soon as he could.

Although we were third-years already, it didn't look like he'd made any friends apart from me. He hadn't joined any clubs or committees, nor had he gone anywhere to hang out with people or found himself a girlfriend.

Time just ticked by without him looking to do any of that. I didn't think that was going to change by the time we graduated junior high, but if Ozu was happy with that, it was fine by me too.

"I should get going myself," I said to no one in particular, before walking out the classroom.

There was a convenience store a short walk from the school, which was where I found Iroha waiting for me. She wasn't alone—next to her was a delinquent girl with blonde hair, a beanie hat, and piercings. Also known as Tachibana, the aspiring musician.

Iroha called out to me. "Ooboshi-senpai! Over here! Wow, you took your time."

"Sorry. I was talking to Ozu about the game. Good to see you again, Tachibana."

"Sup. Nice to see a smile on your face." As Tachibana spoke, the popsicle stick in her mouth wagged up and down. I could see way more of Otoi-san's influence in her compared to when she was a delinquent, probably because she was going over to Otoi Studio so often for her music. That her chosen candy was ice cream instead of lollipops spoke to what kind of artist she was—and honestly, it was kind of adorable.

It struck me that Iroha had a pair of headphones around her neck. She must've been listening to something before I arrived. If I had to guess, they probably belonged to Tachibana. Iroha had nowhere to listen to music at home; it made no sense she'd own a pair of

headphones.

“Listening to Tachibana’s new demo?” I asked.

“No. Just a song that’s popular at the moment.”

“*Demon*, then?”

“How’d you know?!”

“It was the OP to that drama we watched recently. You’re pretty suggestible, huh?”

“Nngh... You didn’t have to call me out like that...” Iroha pouted at me.

Tachibana laughed. “She sure is! She’s always askin’ to listen to the openings of whatever stuff you guys watched together.”

“Oh yeah? And you find them for her every time, Tachibana?”

“Yup! It’s gotta suck when you can’t listen to the music you want in your own home.”

I had to agree. But she could have asked *me*; I would have been happy to let her listen to music at my place—though Iroha had never asked me for anything like that. If she had Tachibana to rely on for that stuff instead, then I guess that was fine. I just hoped she wasn’t holding back because she felt awkward or anything.

“You’re startin’ to cheese me off, though, Iroha.” Tachibana grinned as she took the headphones back. “You’re all over Senpai these days. You guys are off on another date now, right?”

“I-It’s not a date, Tachibana-san! What are you talking about?” Iroha shot back, her face beet red.

“Not a date, huh? But you’re going somewhere just the two of you, yeah?”

“That’s not...*not* right...” Iroha mumbled.

Tachibana knew *exactly* what she was doing. I bet she thought it was hilarious seeing Iroha get so flustered.

Time to step into action.

“C’mon, Tachibana, leave her alone. Don’t take it out on Iroha just ’cause Ozu rejected you.”

“Gah!” Now it was Tachibana’s turn to blush profusely. It was just as I suspected: this pain-in-the-butt knew how to dish it out, but she couldn’t handle being on the receiving end.

“That was *months* ago! How long do you wanna keep rubbin’ it in for?”

“Don’t bully Iroha if you’re not prepared to be bullied yourself.”

“Grnnngh... Cram it! I can’t let myself get distracted by romance anyway, ’cause I’m gonna focus one hundred percent on my music from now on!”

“Yeah, yeah. I hear you.”

“Ugh! D’you hafta to be so mature and understanding?!”

I laughed. “Just don’t be one of those people who starts making

up a fake love life for yourself just 'cause you couldn't handle the rejection." I put my hand on Tachibana's hat and started rubbing her head hard as though she were a little kid.

Because I skipped forward six months, I ended up leaving this part out, but a few months ago, Tachibana Asagi had her heart broken. I probably should have seen it coming when it was Kohinata Ozuma she was after. It was a miracle he'd even managed to form a friendship with *me*. I couldn't imagine him falling in love.

I would have been happy to cheer him and Tachibana on if they *had* ended up dating, but they hadn't, and I wasn't going to push Ozu into doing anything he didn't want to. It must've hurt Tachibana, but she never pushed it—she must have cottoned on to the fact that Ozu was likely to reject her beforehand. Iroha ended up being the one most put out by the whole thing.

"Ozuma's gotta be *blind* if he turned you down!" Iroha said.

"C-Can we drop it, Iroha? I totally respect his decision."

"Maybe, but the way he phrased it was just rude! 'I'm not interested in being your boyfriend.' What the heck?! It's like he didn't even stop to *think* about how that'd make you feel!"

"It actually made me feel better that he phrased it so clearly and finally."

"But you haven't been over even once since then. This whole thing's damaged our friendship."

"Uh... Well that's not just 'cause of your brother. That's also 'cause I've been workin' harder on my music."

"You came over almost every day *before* you asked him out."

"Y-Yeah, 'cause I wanted to see him so badly! D-Do I really hafta spell it out?!"

"You make it sound like you're on her side, Iroha, but you're actually just making things a hundred times worse for her," I said, hoping to defend Tachibana from further emotional damage. "Oh, whoops. We should probably get going."

"Yeah... People are starting to stare."

The number of students on their way home from school was increasing. Iroha's looks made her stand out quite a bit. And from what I'd learned about Tachibana, she was pretty popular among the second-year guys. For a guy like me to be seen with both of them could only lead to dumb rumors. It wasn't like we were talking about anything especially secret, but I'd still prefer not to leave ourselves open to pointless misunderstandings.

If the kids' rumors filtered upwards into their moms' gossip, there was a possibility Iroha's mother would find out about me. I needed to do everything and anything to decrease the risk of her mom learning about what she was trying to do.

“We’re going to the cinema. Wanna come along, Tachibana?” I asked.

“You’re seeing a movie?”

“Uh-huh. The latest *Detective Doyle* movie’s been causing a stir, and I wanna see what it’s like.”

“Isn’t that a kids movie?”

“You’d think so, right? Lately, though, it’s been popular with young adult girls. The plotlines are as solid as you’d expect from a mystery series too.”

We were going for fun, but also for educational purposes, of course. The game we were working on would have elements of an escape-type game featuring likable characters. *Detective Doyle* had mystery, clever tricks, and a cast of timeless characters. It was an indispensable source of inspiration.

“So? Coming?”

“Hmm... I appreciate the invite, but I think I’m good.”

“Why, because you still think me and Ooboshi-senpai are dating? We’re a hundred percent not, so you don’t have to sweat it.”

“No, it’s not that. I was gonna go knuckle down at Otoi-san’s place.”

“Knuckle down?” I said. “What, you mean work on your music?”

“Yeah. I’ve actually got a few new demos I’m s’posed to be sending off this week. They’re goin’ to some pretty big names, so I can’t slack off.”

“Wow, Tachibana-san! Since when were you working with people like that?”

“It’s all thanks to my talent. I got scouted, see, and... Well, I’m kiddin’. Truth is, Otoi-san introduced me to ’em.” Tachibana laughed self-consciously.

“Still, the fact those people are gonna listen to your music is incredible,” I said. “I feel bad for inviting you now. You’ve got way more important things to do.”

“C’mon, quit it. Now you’re makin’ me feel awkward. But anyway, that’s what’s goin’ on.” Tachibana glanced up at me.

“I guess this is where we split for today, then. Do your best to make those big shots hear you, okay?”

“Heh! You got it!” Tachibana rubbed the spot under her nose self-consciously before flashing me a bicep. With that, she knocked her bike’s kickstand out of the way with her foot, leaped up onto the saddle, and pedaled away like a knight on a steed.

She was gone within a few seconds. An uncomfortable silence passed between me and Iroha. It was probably because of how Tachibana teased us that I was feeling overly conscious, even though we’d spent tons of one-on-one time together before. I could only see

things getting more awkward the longer the silence continued, so I opened my mouth.

“Sh-*Shall* we get going, then?”

“Y-Yeah. Let’s go...”

Ugh! We were stuttering like a couple that had only just started dating!

But Iroha and I *weren’t* like that.

A director couldn’t date his actress, and even entertaining the idea was rude.

Come back, Akiteru... We good?

I took a deep breath. All was well again.

We arrived at the mall, which sat more or less on the boundary between our town and the next one over. The cinema was on the top floor. The time we spent walking towards it and going up the escalator felt strangely awkward.

It was a weekday evening and far from busy, but there were a few students here and there, some around our age, some older. I knew I was overthinking things, but I couldn’t help but worry we might be seen by someone from our school.

I could actually feel people staring. I mean, I was with a gorgeous girl in the same school uniform as me. She never failed to turn heads. It didn’t seem to bother Iroha as much; she was probably used to the admiring looks.

In fact, she seemed to be more interested in *me*. She kept glancing at me every few seconds, even though any words that passed between us were far from riveting. It had been more than six months since I started working as her producer, but I guess she was still wary of me.

That was why I was doing my best *not* to stare at her, and ended up more conscious of the looks from people around us. There was no winning this one.

Eventually we made it to the cinema. After buying our tickets at the machines, we lined up for drinks and popcorn.

“What would you like?” I asked. “I’ll get it for you.”

“D-Don’t worry about it. I’ll pay for myself.”

“Suit yourself.”

“Thanks.”

Iroha didn’t tend to budge on things like this. I guess it was a good thing, but I wouldn’t mind if she let me spoil her a *little*. Not letting me pay for her at all was better than making me pay for everything, though. Now *that* would be annoying.

Balance was a difficult thing to achieve.

“Hm... I guess I’ll get a cola. They don’t have a lot of options in places like this, huh?”

“It’s more about the movie than the food after all.”

“Have you already decided what you’re getting, Ooboshi-senpai?”

“Tomato juice.”

“Is that *all* you ever drink?! Do they even sell that in a movie theater?”

“I wouldn’t go to a theater that doesn’t.”

“H-Hey, you weren’t kidding... There it is, right on the menu...”

“You should have some too. It’s good for you.”

“If I’m honest, your undying love for it has made me wanna try it at least once...” She gulped.

“Go for it. You’re still young enough to make mistakes. You should try everything you can.”

“Okay, gramps. You’re only one year older than me, y’know!”

“One year makes a huge difference. Especially considering I’ll be in high school next year while you’re still stuck in junior high!” I laughed, triumphant.

“Hmph. Fine. Tomato juice it is.”

I didn’t know what was “fine” exactly, but I was happy to see Iroha taking my learned advice on board.

Still pouting slightly, Iroha asked, “What popcorn are you getting?”

“Unsalted salty. It’s the healthy choice.”

“Are you serious right now?” Iroha paused. “Okay. If that’s what you’re having, I’ll have it too.”

“Huh? If you want a different flavor, I’ll match with you. I’m not gonna die if I don’t get my unsalted salty popcorn.”

“I-It’s fine. Don’t worry about me,” Iroha said, while her eyes clearly lingered on the photo of the caramel popcorn on the menu. It was the first time I fully understood the expression “to eat with your eyes.”

“Y’know, I think I *do* feel like something sweet,” I said.

“Huh?”

“Who’s counting calories? Let’s get the caramel one.”

“You changed your mind awfully quickly.”

“So what if I did? You okay with caramel, Iroha?”

Iroha averted her gaze awkwardly and lowered her voice. “I guess. I *did* kinda want it to start with...”

She could do with being more honest.

But then, wasn’t it my job as the producer to pick up on her more subtle cues and make sure they were tended to?

I carried our tray of popcorn and drinks into screen 7. I ducked my head as we made for our seats, only shooting a cursory glance at the commercial playing on the screen. I stepped over the knees of moviegoers, apologizing all the while. Our seats were in the center of

the center row. In other words, the very center of the theater. It was my personal favorite spot in the cinema, and gave the best view of the screen.

“Let’s see... This is my seat... H-Huh? Wah!”

“There’s clumsy and then there’s you, Iroha.”

“It’s not my fault! It just bounced back at me!”

“I’ll hold it down, okay? Just sit.”

We were dealing with the seats typical of a cinema—the type that folded up if no one was sitting in them. Iroha struggled by herself, so I held it down for her, at which point she tentatively lowered herself into it. Once she was in, she let out a sigh of relief.

“Th-Thanks. Without you, I’d probably have made a fool of myself and would wanna get outta here as quickly as possible.”

“I woulda thought you could figure out how the chairs worked using a little common sense.”

“I dunno... I’ve never seen seats like this. I had no idea.”

“Oh...”

If it was her first time dealing with them, I was more sympathetic. It wasn’t like I could remember whether my first encounter with these seats went any more smoothly. I probably picked up the knack at some point from seeing movies with my parents when I was little. Iroha’s parents *hadn’t* taken her to the movies—so it was no wonder the seats stumped her.

“Sorry,” I said. “I didn’t think.”

“No, it’s okay. I wasn’t offended or anything.”

“That doesn’t mean it was okay. I’m sorry for teasing you.”

“You’re super weird, Ooboshi-senpai.” Iroha looked like she was having a hard time deciding whether she was impressed or exasperated.

I already knew I was weird. Especially when I dealt with Iroha—I generated readings of around 150 percent weirdness by my estimate. I was always careful not to overstep the mark. Not to offend her. I couldn’t remember ever putting more effort into being considerate of someone.

But what did you expect? She was my friend’s little sister.

All it took was a small misstep to snowball into something big, and I could kiss my friendship with Ozu goodbye. My relationship with Iroha required a finesse comparable to a bomb disposal squad.

The buzzer sounded, and the room turned dark. That meant the commercials were over and it was time for the main event. I peeled my gaze away from Iroha, straightened up in my seat, and focused on the screen.

Detective Doyle was a long-running anime series. A masterpiece, and this was its latest movie. Time to see whether it would live up to

the hype!

Whoa... These production values are something else...

That was my earnest impression when the film passed the second climax of its middle scenes. A second explosion had just gone off in the building—and it was *awesome*. Entertainment and pyrotechnics went together like salt and pepper. Adrenaline was pumping through me.

The characters were all so charming. The way the main character went from a little bit ditzzy in his everyday life, to super serious once an incident went down was such a perfect jump, I felt like I'd never get sick of it. I'd probably go even crazier for this stuff if I were still in elementary school.

The supporting characters also had the designs, backgrounds, and personalities that appealed to my inner child, and I was getting really hyped.

The movie was setting up another fascinating mystery, and I was practically on the edge of my seat, eager to know what was coming next. Every single building block of the series was so perfect, it was no wonder it got this popular.

But, despite how incredible the movie was, I didn't get as engrossed as I otherwise might have.

All because of her.

The way she gasped with surprise.

The way her eyes lit up with excitement.

The way her face fell with disappointment.

The way her mouth dropped open with shock.

The way she *scowled* with indignation.



The faces Iroha made in reaction to each scene were so entertaining, I couldn't help but look over at her at regular intervals.

Obviously, she couldn't say what she was feeling since it was a public theater, but she didn't have to. Her expressions practically shouted what was on her mind. They were so exaggerated, like her emotions were perfectly matched up with the characters. She must've been highly sensitive to each character's feelings—but that seemed just about right for an actress.

“Aah... That was so *good*.”

“Glad you enjoyed it.”

Once the movie was over and we were out of the room, Iroha extended her body in a long, satisfying stretch.

I was relieved. It wouldn't be my fault if the movie sucked, but it'd still get me down if she didn't enjoy the film I'd invited her to see.

“It's nice coming out to the cinema, right? Especially when it's a movie not out on streaming services yet.”

“Yeah! The voice acting gave me a lot of stuff to think about too.” Iroha's voice bounced with excitement. She seemed to have much more energy than usual.

Or maybe this *was* usual, when she wasn't holding herself back and acting like other people wanted her to? Since she was so eager anyway, now would be a good time to test this new mode of hers out.

“Did you have a favorite character?” I asked.

“The Thief with Twenty Faces! The guy who could play the role of a café waiter, a secret policeman, a criminal, an overseas spy, a Naicho officer, a detective, a student, a homeless guy, and about twelve other characters!”

“Ah. Yeah, he's super popular with female fans. It's hard to know where he stands when he's always pretending to be something different.”

“He's just way too cool!”

“Got a weakness for good-looking men, huh?”

“It's not just his face, though, but his work and his backstory... You don't think it'd be cool, being able to experience twenty different lives?”

“Sounds a lot like acting to me.”

“Right?! It gets you all excited and it speaks to your inner child!”

That, or your inner chuunibyou.

“Y'know, it's funny,” I said.

“What is?”

“I thought only guys got hyped up over this stuff. Figured girls would look down on it.”

“You can’t say that, Ooboshi-senpai! That kinda thing gets people mobbed online these days.”

“Seriously?”

“You can’t talk like there’s a huge gap between guys and girls. If you think girls can’t appreciate a certain type of awesome, you’re mistaken!” Iroha exhaled sharply.

“I wasn’t saying it to make fun of you. I just thought you’d have more mature tastes,” I said, in a hurry to defend myself. The thought I might’ve offended Iroha was making me break out in a sweat. If I raced to a mirror right now, I bet the face staring back at me would be deathly pale.

But then...Iroha burst out laughing. “You really took me that seriously, huh?!” She slapped me lightly on the back. “This isn’t what I’m like when I’m mad, y’know.”

“What *are* you like?”

“I outright ignore you and don’t listen to a word you have to say.”

“Just imagining it feels like my heart’s been ripped out...”

“Then be careful you don’t make me mad for real, okay?”

“Right...”

Now I really wanna make sure I don’t get on her bad side...

Out of nowhere, Iroha stuck her tongue out at me playfully. “I was kidding, actually. Sorry, I think I took it a bit too far.”

“Only you would take it all back right at the very end.”

“Aha ha ha. If it gets to the point I’m actually lecturing you, I’ve gone past what makes me, me.”

I laughed. “You got that right.”

Was she really right, though? Did I know Kohinata Iroha well enough to recognize what was “her” or not?

That question gripped me the entire elevator ride down from the cinema.

“Hey, I just remembered something.” I turned to face Iroha the moment we’d reached the shopping floor. “There’s something I wanted to buy. Could you wait for me at the food court?”

“Perfect timing. I gotta go to the bathroom.”

“Let’s split for now, then. We’ll regroup at the food court, have some liquor or something, then head home.”

“Liquor?! We’re kids!”

“Uh! I just said that without thinking... It was all those villains named after alcohol in *Doyle*... I didn’t really mean it.”

“Pffft. I know people complain about kids getting influenced by TV, but gimme a break!” With that, Iroha excused herself and dashed off to the bathroom.

In my esteemed opinion, Iroha was way more suggestible than me.

She was the one who was gonna be desperate to listen to the movie's opening theme when she got home. Too bad she disappeared before I could point that out—but it was no biggie.

Iroha sure liked to banter, though. I felt like she'd been throwing a ton of devastating zingers at me lately. She liked to pretend she was a reserved girl, but she might secretly be super competitive.

Seriously, there was still so much I had to learn about girls. Oh, whoops. I gotta be careful about what I think so the online mobs don't come after me. How do I delete a thought I just had?

"Welp, no use just standing here."

Speed was of the essence. I had something important to do, and I wanted it done quick.

I took care of my important something, met up with Iroha, and then left the mall with her. By the time we'd made it to the station closest to our apartment building, the sun had already sunk way below the other side of the neighborhood buildings, plunging the world into darkness. Except for the moonlight and streetlamps, of course.

It was striking how a tiny change in a familiar setting could create such a different feel. We only had the limited light of the streetlamps to guide us along the road. My friend's little sister walked beside me, her golden-blond hair fluttering gently in the wind.

I'd walked this road so many times before, but this time it made me feel like a delinquent walking down an alleyway for whatever reason.

That one thought dominated my mind, and I realized how new this sort of thing was to me. That just made the guilt weigh on me even heavier. The plastic bag hanging from my right hand seemed to increase in weight too.

"By the way, Ooboshi-senpai."

"Mm?"

"What did you buy?"

"I can't tell you. Yet," I said, like it was a state secret.

"Huh. Whatever you say." Iroha shrugged.

She had to be feigning that disinterest. She wouldn't have asked if she weren't curious, after all.

But if it *was* an act, she was sticking to it like glue. She didn't so much as glance at the bag again, and instead changed the subject.

"Thanks for today, Ooboshi-senpai."

"Sure. You don't have to thank me, though. I didn't even pay for your ticket or anything."

"I know, but it's something I never would've done by myself."

“That’s true, I guess. Well, I don’t wanna reject your gratitude, so I’ll just say you’re welcome.”

“That’s the way to do it.” Iroha giggled, then looked up at the sky. The moon was white and round, and for a moment I was reminded of Princess Kaguya.

I had no idea why. Princess Kaguya was a young woman who made unreasonable demands of her suitors. Kohinata Iroha was about as far from that description as you could get.

“I kinda get what Ozuma was going on about now.”

“Ozu? Did he say something about me?”

“Yeah. He said being with you is like being illuminated by a bright light.” Iroha pointed up at the night sky above us. “You’re like a star, Senpai. A big star, just like your name.”

“Are you trying to make fun of me?” I tried to brush it off, but truth was, I was feeling pretty embarrassed.

No one had ever analyzed my name—written with the characters for “big” and “star”—that closely before.

Also, was Iroha looking at the stars instead of the moon? The moon was so massive right now, I hadn’t even stopped to notice the tiny glittering stars dotted around it. Even the evening star was minuscule compared to the sun or the moon. I’d never really seen the point of paying attention to the stars.

“I spoke to Ozuma for the first time in ages.”

“Yeah?”

Her words comforted me. I’d heard their relationship was strained, and could only imagine it wasn’t doing either of them any good. Even if they only exchanged a few words, if it meant they could shorten the distance between them, it was cause for celebration.

“I think he enjoys working on your game. Actually said he wanted to make games for a living. I...didn’t think he’d ever given any thought to his future.”

“You never asked him.”

“Do you think I’ve treated him badly?”

“Not actively. And it works both ways...”

“I know. But we’ve never been close enough to talk about stuff like that. Ozuma’s never seemed interested in me or mom.”

Which only caused Iroha to become disinterested, I guess.

Human relationships were reflective, like mirrors. When you liked someone, they tended to like you, and when you hated someone, they tended to hate you in return. Same thing if you weren’t interested in them at all. It was likely that principle that had sucked all conversation out of the Kohinata household.

“I wonder why Ozu lost all interest in you. Maybe he was too caught up in his inventing?”

“I dunno. I don’t think he’s even all that interested in his own inventions.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I’ve seen him working away in his room, like when I’ve brought him his laundry or some food...” Iroha hesitated, just for a beat. “He’s always tinkering with these devices, but he never smiles or anything. Like he’s bored.”

“What?”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. The Ozu I knew *loved* to work on computer programs and machinery. I couldn’t imagine him looking *bored*.

“Maybe it’s not that he doesn’t enjoy it. Maybe you caught him in a bad mood or something?”

“Thought you might say that. Probably means he only shows that side of himself to you.”

“Me?”

“I’ve never seen Ozuma looking happier than when he’s working on the game. It’s a lot more work than just writing a bunch of code, and it takes away the time he has for making robots and other weird inventions. I think the reason he’s having so much fun, and why he feels like it’s really something worth doing, is because he’s doing it with you.”

“I’m nothing special, though. I’m just his friend.”

The only reason I became his friend in the first place was because his talent impressed me, and I wanted to see more of what he’d make up close. I was just some curious kid. You could replace me with almost anyone else, and I bet no one’d notice.

“Maybe that’s what Ozuma needed: someone to show an interest in what he did.”

“No way. He’s the kind of genius who doesn’t even need to bother with self-reflection.”

Validation motivated average people like me. Not geniuses like Ozu. He was the kind of person who could get engrossed in something for hours, and he occupied another plane from me and the rest of humanity’s average members. Why should he seek validation from someone less intelligent?

Although, if I really thought about it...

The only way I could understand Ozu was from my own perspective. If this was how his sister understood him, then maybe she was talking about a side of him I was unfamiliar with.

“You said he wanted to work in game development, right? I think he could really be a big name.”

“Just like you, if you wanted to pursue art.”

“Get outta here!”

“Why? I *like* your drawings!”

“Then I’ll show them to you whenever you want. But only you.”

“Okay! How about today?”

“At least give me some warning!”

We stepped out of the elevator on the fifth floor of our building, and I took out my room key.

“I want you to come in quickly before you go home, Iroha.”

“Wuh-oh. Sensing some red flags over here.”

“It’s nothing like that. It’ll only take a minute.”

“Sometimes that’s all you need.”

“N-Not for me... Ugh! I can’t believe I walked right into that!”

“Aha ha! I was kidding. I’m coming on in!”

You’d think she could tease me without trying to give me a heart attack at the same time. Who did she think she was, Tachibana?

Scratch that, Iroha’s mischievousness was a light touch compared to hers.

Anyway, we stepped into my apartment.

“I’m home,” I said, as was customary.

“I’m home.”

“Why are *you* saying that?”

“Why are you questioning it? I’m just going with the flow. So, what did you want?”

“Right. I thought it’d be bad if anyone saw this, which is why I invited you in. But anyway... Here.” I held up the shopping bag.

Iroha took it from me with both hands, her eyes wide. The logo on the bag was from a game store on the mall’s first floor. Inside it was a product that had been heavily advertised as a must-have around the peripherals section.

“Headphones...”

Red headphones. A recent model, with the best available sound quality and features, wrapped up in hard plastic, just waiting to be opened. I got a bit embarrassed over the fact I’d basically just given her a gift, so I looked away and scratched at my cheek.

“I thought I might be going kinda far, but...it’ll be handy to have them, right?”

“I-I can’t have them at my place, though.”

“I know. I’ll keep them here for you.”

“So it’ll be like how I can watch movies and play games here? I can come over when you’re in and listen to music?” Iroha asked, hesitant.

“Not quite. That wouldn’t be any different from borrowing Tachibana’s headphones, right? You’d still be relying on someone

else.”

“What were you thinking, then?”

“Lemme show you.” I took down the wall clock by the front door and opened it up. There was a small storage space inside, just big enough to hold one of my family’s most valuable treasures. “You’ll be taking this.”

“A key?”

“Yup. My spare key. With this, you can come over whenever you want to listen to music. Not just that, but you could do some studying for your acting, or play, read, or watch whatever you want. I kinda wish I realized you needed a place to do all that stuff before...”

“A-Are you sure about this? Won’t that be awkward for you?”

“As long as you’re reasonable with it, it’ll be fine. I’m gonna get mad if you charge into my bedroom without knocking, or sneak in super early or late without asking, but I don’t think you’re the kinda person to do that.”

I’d been grappling with the idea of giving the key to her for a long while now. I was worried it’d be too familiar a thing to do, or that it might threaten my privacy. But when I saw Iroha borrowing Tachibana’s headphones today, I realized I was taking an embarrassingly long time to make up my mind.

Iroha needed to rely on her friend in order to access music at leisure. And as Iroha was overly conscious of other people’s emotions, I could only imagine how much pressure it put her under, having to beg Tachibana to share her headphones. How much guilt did she suffer every single time?

I knew what Ozu would have to say about it: that she was being irrational. That her feelings were inefficient. I was his friend, and I was Iroha’s producer. Therefore, I had to find a solution that was as efficient as possible.

“I’ll talk to Ozu about this too, and make him think the spare key is for him. I can’t tell him you’re studying drama at my place, so I can’t really justify giving you the key. If he found out about it on his own, it’d be a real pain having to smooth things over.”

“I can’t just tell him it’s so I can have access to entertainment? He already knows that’s what I do when I come over, so I think he’d get it.”

“It’s a bit of a flimsy reason to give you full reign of my apartment. He’d probably point out you could just wait till I was around, and that you don’t need a key.”

“You think *Ozuma* would bother to say all that?”

“That’s not all. There’s a reason it’ll be best to have him keep the key in his room.”

Iroha cocked her head at me. I kept my expression stern as I

continued.

“The reason is your mom.”

“Ah...”

“You said your mom’s not really interested in Ozu, right?

Compared to the leash she keeps you on.”

“Mm. Yeah, that’s gonna have to be a yes.”

“Making his room the perfect hiding place.”

I doubted Ozu would appreciate me deciding to hide the key in his room without asking first, but considering everything I was doing to encourage his talents, I could probably get him to agree to it.

There was just one problem left.

Whether Iroha actually *liked* the idea or not.

I’d said everything I had to say, and it was a *lot*. There was a chance it would only amount to me having stroked my own ego, and Iroha getting annoyed.

“You’re... I mean, you’re *really* weird, Ooboshi-senpai.”

“Ngh!” I clutched my chest in an attempt to withstand the mental damage.

Had I failed? I had thought my twin blades of the spare key and the headphones would prove invincible...but they may have just self-destructed into a cloud of creepy. The difficult part was supposed to be over, but it was only *now* my heart was pounding hard enough to burst out of my chest.

Was she about to push this all back in my face?

“Thank you, Ooboshi-senpai.”

Scratch that. We were good. I knew as much from the moment Iroha smiled and held the headphones to her chest.

“I kinda wanna use them right away. Is it okay to stay a bit longer?”

“Oh, right. I guess you’d wanna give them a test run. Sure thing.”

“Thank you.” Iroha took her shoes off and stepped into my place properly. She’d been here so many times, but right now I could barely handle it.

I *still* thought I was about to have a heart attack.



Begone, wicked thoughts, begone! I know I gave a girl a gift, but it wasn't anything romantic like flowers! And really, I'm just lending those headphones to her! It's purely for business purposes too, not because I like her! I swear!

As I did my best to mentally convince myself of that, I led Iroha to my room, where the CD player was. I know what you're thinking: a CD player in this day and age? It was a hand-me-down from my parents, okay? It had been around since before listening to music on your phone was commonplace, and really I was using it more out of habit than anything else.

"That's a CD? I've never seen one before. Looks like a frisbee."

"Don't throw it."

"It's hard to resist when it's looking all round and throwable like that."

I was ready to hit her if she even tried. Even though corporal punishment is frowned upon these days, sometimes violence really is the only answer.

"I'll buy you a smartphone when our project starts earning money. For now, you're gonna have to put up with the retro stuff," I said.

"Hey, I'm not about to look a gift horse in the mouth." Iroha shot me a wonderfully modest grin, then put on her headphones and got started right away.

Seeing the way she so eagerly examined the CD made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. I wondered if this was how it felt to have a daughter. I booted up my computer, reflecting on how I had never had such sappy thoughts before. As I checked my emails, I felt like a dad doing some remote work on a day off while his daughter played behind him.

I had quite a few emails. From scenario writers, illustrators, and a few emails Ozu had sent them and I was CC'd into. Right, he *did* say he'd given some feedback on their work from a programming perspective. That had to be what these were about.

"Huh?"

Optimistic, I'd opened one of the emails. As soon as I did, my hand froze fast over the mouse.

I didn't have to actually *read* the email to understand.

The word choice, the tone—all of it was dominated by one prevalent emotion: anger.

"What the hell... What the hell is this?!"

Hostility, hostility, and more hostility, overflowing from the screen. I'd never seen such aggressive sentences lined up one after the other in all my life. Bile was rising to my throat. I never imagined a complaint could have such a damaging emotional effect.

“You okay, Ooboshi-senpai?” Iroha asked, noticing something was up. The innocent, questioning look on her face shouldn’t have been a big deal, but I was immensely grateful for it right now.

I smiled stiffly at her. My next words were pointless, pathetic, and didn’t amount to much more than me whining at her. “I am royally screwed.”

From: Taroumaru Hanako Anderson

Subject: Scenario Feedback and Future Dealings

Dear Aki-sama,

I hope this email finds you well. This is writer Taroumaru Hanako Anderson.

I’ve been through the feedback on the scenario I submitted. I’m grateful for OZ-san’s accurate, technical, highly specific, and, if I might add, infallible comments.

I am afraid, as an inadequate writer who doesn’t “meet the bare minimum of professional standards” and doesn’t “understand” your game “at all,” that I am incapable of satisfying OZ-san’s requirements. I’m dreadfully sorry, but I will unfortunately have to pull out of the project.

You may think this an extreme reaction, in which case I urge you to read the comments OZ-san addressed to me. I think you will understand then why it has come to this.

As a fellow creative, I am disheartened and disappointed that your colleague did not trust me to carry out my work as I saw fit.

(The writer went on to express their dissatisfaction in the rest of the long-winded message.)

From: Teehee Pudding

Subject: Are you actually serious?

Dear Aki-sama,

I hope you’re doing well. This is illustrator Teehee Pudding.

I’m emailing you to ask about OZ-san. I got his feedback earlier, and I was wondering if you actually checked any of his comments?

It’s a real shame they read to me like he was insulting my entire career.

(The rest gets long, so I’m cutting it out.)

My stomach was twisting itself up in knots as I replied to the piranhas in my inbox. I apologized as sincerely as I could, careful not to add any fuel to the fire. It was definitely nerve-racking dealing with people who were so mad, but there was something else stressing me out more.

I had a look at Ozu’s comments.

It was no wonder to me why our contractors were upset. Worst of

all, I didn't have any excuses.

After sending several emails back and forth, I leaped up from my seat like a pilot from the ejector seat of their fighter jet, and sprawled out on the floor.

"Okay! I made it!"

"G-Good job. You look totally beat."

"Oh, hey, Iroha. You still here?"

"Ouch! I stayed 'cause I was worried about you, y'know!"

"Oh... Sorry. I'm kinda tense. Thanks for sticking around."

"Yeesh..." Iroha sighed, then came to kneel next to my head. If only she'd lift my head up for me, I'd be resting it in her lap. "Did you manage to solve the issue you were having?"

"It's done. I wouldn't say it's *solved*."

"What d'you mean?"

"Our writer and our artist quit, and I wasn't able to stop them."

"What?!" Iroha shrieked.

Yeah. I wanted to scream too.

But I couldn't have done anything more. The trust between contractor and client was beyond repair. I was struggling to express myself through text, and so I begged to be allowed to phone them, but they refused, accusing me of wanting to waste their time and not taking their concerns seriously. In the end, I was forced to give up and accept we were two creators down.

"Didn't you just say 'I made it'? It doesn't look like you made anything."

"I meant that I made it to the end of our online conversation without losing my mind. I thought they'd end up ghosting me partway through, but that never happened."

"Um, okay. Sounds like you had it rough."

"Yeah. Sorry you had to see that."

"I'm the one who stuck around." Iroha glanced at the computer screen. "Was it Ozuma's fault?"

"Uh-huh. They said they didn't wanna work with him."

"Oh..."

Even from where I lay on the floor, I could see Iroha was crushed. When I remembered what she said about Ozu enjoying the game-making process, my own chest felt tight too. I never thought the project would go without a hitch, but now that we were actually running into those roadblocks, it felt way tougher than I imagined. It wasn't enough just to have Ozu as a friend. I had to deal with him as a *person*. But how?

Maybe I'd been too naive about things this entire time.

"Okay!" Out of nowhere, I sat up like a spring.

"Huh? Wah!" Iroha recoiled back from me, throwing her hands in

the air like she was about to start yelling *banzai*.

I looked her right in the eye then, and told her *exactly* what I was planning. “I’m gonna go talk to Ozu. And don’t worry. Because we *will* get the game finished.”

And then, I left.

“Which is why I’ve come to speak to you, Ozu.”

“...Okay.”

It was already late at night. Iroha said her mom was still out on business, so I could charge in at this hour, guns blazing, despite my lowly status of “friend.”

I went straight to Ozu’s room. By myself; Iroha was probably busy fretting in her own room.

I had dubbed my plan “Leave it to Aki.” I was taking responsibility for everything, and would sort it out on my own. First off, I told Ozu about the spare key and got him to agree to having it. Just when he must have been thinking I was done, I brought up what I *really* wanted to talk about.

“I gotta be honest, the comments you gave back came across pretty harsh. It’s no wonder our creators had their feelings hurt.”

I didn’t want to lecture him; we were friends. But, as members of the same development team, there were some things that just needed to be said. This wouldn’t be the last time I’d have to steel my resolve if I didn’t want the team going completely off the rails.

“Why did you write your comments like that?”

Ozu didn’t reply right away. He stared impassively at the inbox on the PC screen. The LED lighting cast dark shadows over his face and sapped the color from his irises. His eyes looked completely blank, and I couldn’t tell what he might be thinking.

A beat passed.

“Was there something wrong with the way I wrote my comments?”

“You serious?”

“Of course I’m serious.”

“‘You don’t understand how games work.’ ‘This is sloppy. It’s hard to believe you have experience in game development.’ You can’t tell me you *weren’t* trying to get under their skin with that stuff.”

I’d exaggerated some of those quotes, but they weren’t far off what Ozu had *actually* written. There were also a lot of comments where he’d used technical language as though it’d be understood by everyone. His feedback had caused untold damage with those two factors combined.

“I wasn’t getting under anyone’s skin; I was just telling them the

truth, plain and simple.”

“It’s important to think about *how* you say something, though. These are—were—our teammates.”

“Teammates? What, these guys?”

“Yes, these guys. Just because they’re contractors doesn’t change that. What you said might’ve been true, but you should’ve picked your words more carefully.”

“You’re wrong.” Ozu shook his head. When he looked at me, his gaze was unexpectedly resolute. The opposite of blank. There was an intense light in his eyes, caused by something close to anger. “They were *never* our teammates. Otherwise they wouldn’t have tried to trick you.”

“Trick me...?” Both his words and his outburst of emotion had come out of nowhere. Slightly panicked, I could only parrot his words.

“They took on the job you offered, claiming to have experience in game development. They said they’d worked on famous games by Honeyplace Works, and mobile games for major IT companies. Their work had apparently been ‘pivotal’ to each project; they just weren’t credited. That was why you gave them the job, right? Both of them.”

“Y-Yeah... But they really did seem to have history with those companies. I checked their work over before I agreed to anything too, and it was all fine.”

“Their writing and drawing skills were fine, yeah? But a game isn’t a novel, and it isn’t an artbook.”

There was nothing I could say in response to that. Though I’d been studying game development, I had as much knowledge as a gnat when compared to Ozu. I wasn’t capable of judging the quality of a creator’s work.

“The stuff they submitted couldn’t have come from anyone experienced. The scenario was more like a poem, with no thought put into how it’d fit in with the gameplay. The character designs would be total resource hogs if we actually implemented them, and the artist clearly didn’t know how to make a UI visually logical.”

“So you’re saying they lied about their experience?”

“Maybe not lied, but exaggerated. They’ve probably worked in the industry, but only on the lower rungs of the ladder. Doing the work they’re told to do by their managers without understanding what makes a game a game. Calling them professionals is a joke.”

“Ozu! That’s way too harsh!”

“Harsh? By whose standards? I’m telling the truth. That’s all.”

“I know, but...”

“Say they didn’t have any game development experience at all, but they were among the most successful writers and artists. Then, I wouldn’t have a problem. Yet they sold themselves as creators who

couldn't produce anything prize-worthy but had a ton of experience in game development. *That* was the lie."

Ozu made a very good point—but good points weren't always enough to move people. They were enough to lead a horse to water, but not to make it drink. That same horse might even drown in the water, and that wasn't a risk Ozu should be making with members of the same team.

I knew, though, that even if I said that to him, it wouldn't resonate. He acted according to what he thought was right; there was no malice there. It wasn't just that—if what he said was true, he'd just protected me from imposters who were willing to take advantage of my ignorance. If I criticized him after that act of thoughtfulness, no matter how fair that criticism may be, it would only hurt him.

That being said, if Ozu was ready to attack his team members with no self-awareness, there was no way he'd ever be able to work comfortably within a group.

I'm sorry, Iroha. Maybe we really will have to throw in the towel...

"Also," Ozu said.

"Yeah?"

"There's one more thing that made me wanna show 'em a thing or two..." Ozu muttered. He looked away from me awkwardly. "I didn't wanna tell you about this, but...I felt like there was something off, ever since that first meeting with them, so I hacked into their LIME conversations. They were talking to each other behind our backs. Laughing at your expense."

I stared at him.

"They made a big deal of how you were only in junior high. Said you wouldn't be able to tell how good their work was, so they could fleece you for way higher than their normal rates. How it would be an easy job because you don't understand the industry."

I *did* think they were charging more than the standard rates I'd found online. But there'd been a lot of fuss on social media about how creators deserved to be paid more, and I'd also accepted their rates out of a desire to respect their work as professionals. All the while completely clueless as to what they were saying behind our backs.

"I was willing to let it all slide if they gave us something good. They were being jerks, but that didn't mean they were *bad* at their job. But it was obvious they put no effort into what they submitted, and *that* was what did it for me." Ozu's voice trembled.

I was totally frozen to the spot, unable to say a single word. To be honest, I wasn't at all surprised to hear what the creators had said about me. It *bothered* me, obviously, but there was something that struck me way more than that.

I'd never seen Ozu express such powerful emotions before.

“What the hell, Ozu. You’re...*really* kind. Y’know that?”

That didn’t make the tone of his comments okay. I realized now, though, that his problem wasn’t a lack of emotion. Far from it. He’d switched off the safety and pulled the trigger, releasing the most devastating of bullets. Ozu’s problem was that he went all out.

“Okay, I got it. It’s my fault, Ozu.”

“Huh?”

“I’m inexperienced, so they thought they could take me for a ride. I didn’t do enough, and ended up putting you in the firing line.”

“No, it’s not like—”

“It’s fine, I already know. I’m aware more than anyone that I’m totally talentless.”

It didn’t matter what I did; I’d never be more than average. When it came to tests, I invariably got an okay score: neither good nor bad. Fitness evaluations always put me smack-bang in the middle of my class. My knowledge of art, drama, and programming remained firmly at the midpoint of “layman.”

So was I a jack-of-all-trades? No. That implied I was actually *decent* at the stuff I did. I was ordinary. Nothing more, nothing less.

“I’m never going to be a genius. I’ve accepted that,” I said. “The best I can do is hone my skills until they reach mediocrity.”

My base stats were below awful. It was impossible to get them all up to the gold standard from a starting point like that. Silver or bronze, though? I might just about manage that.

“I’m gonna push myself to the very limits, and expand what the word ‘average’ means—for all of my skills. Same goes for my programming knowledge. I’ll never be anywhere near as good as you, but I want to gain as much understanding as your average programmer. And then...”

I’ll make it so you never have to lash out at anybody ever again.

When I left Ozu’s room, I found Iroha leaning against the wall right next to his door.

“You were listening in, huh?”

“Well, yeah. I was curious.”

“You’ve got guts trying to eavesdrop on us. Anyway... If Ozu is gonna get as heated as he did, I can only make sure things go one-hundred-percent smoothly from now on. I can’t afford to slack on your training either, Iroha.”

“You’ve got a lot on your plate, don’t you?”

“Maybe, but I’m ready to give it my all.”

“I bet you’re really gonna mature through all this, Ooboshisenpai...”

“Gee, thanks, mom.”

She *was* younger than me, right?

“I didn’t mean it like that. It’s more like, the more you mature, the more of this sort of stuff you’ll start taking on by yourself. That’ll make the road ahead tough.”

“I’ve already thought that all through.”

“But, if you’re ever looking for someone to support you...” Iroha slowly reached a hand out towards me. She stood up on her tiptoes, like she was aiming to pat me on the head.

Her face came into view, right in front of mine. Her eyes were filled with tender kindness. I suddenly remembered something Tachibana had said.

“If I liked you, I’d be all over you in a sweet, girly kinda way. Like, being nice to you and trying to act all cute.”

If what she said about love was true, then what Iroha was doing right now was...

My heart was pounding. With each passing second, I was more and more aware of the girl in front of me. She was about to touch my head.

“J-Just kidding! As if I even *could* support you.” Iroha pulled her hand back. “I got a lot of maturing to do myself before I’m at your level.”

“Hey, I’m not satisfied with where I’m at either.”

This was no time to let my weird fantasies run away with me. I could have all the time in the world to mold myself into the guy I now knew I wanted to be, and it would never be enough.

Kohinata Iroha. My friend’s little sister. My adorable kouhai, who had been a stranger like any other when we met. After a lot of twists and turns, she had become something more than that. The girl who had always concealed her true feelings out of constant consideration for those around her. How could I *not* feel for a girl like that when I was taking her hand and guiding her along this new path?

But I couldn’t allow myself to pay attention to the feelings swirling around inside me.

After all, though I’d reached out my hand to this wandering child, I was nothing more than a sheep lost along the complex, mysterious path of life myself.

“You can always give me a hand when I’m struggling. How’s that sound?”

“Great!” Iroha gave me a mock salute and an energetic smile. It was a lovely sight to behold.

Our relationship as senpai and kouhai was a very comfortable one. I wanted it to last for as long as possible.

I couldn't have been more naive.

But how was I to know that, the closer you got to Kohinata Iroha, the more *insufferable* she became?

"Lemme out! I want off this ride right now! I can't *stand* you gushing over Iroha anymore!"

"Chill, Mashiro! We're nearly at the top! Fall off now, and you're dead meat!"

"Haah... Oxygen... Need oxygen... You done with your story yet?"

"Yeah, don't worry. I'm done reminiscing."

"Oh yeah? Actually, there's still one thing I find odd."

"Being?"

"You gave your key to Iroha-chan, right? I always thought OZ had it in case of emergencies."

"Yeah, about that. I was happy with Iroha having the key at that point, because she still thought like a normal person. When she started to get more and more annoying, I took it from her and gave it to Ozu for safekeeping."

"So that's what happened."

"By the way, there's still a couple anecdotes from the time before Iroha was annoying. Wanna hear them?"

"H-How much material are we talking?"

"More than a hundred pages worth of one of those small mass-market paperbacks."

"I'm good."

"Suit yourself. They're pretty upbeat anecdotes, though. Just thought you'd be interested."

"I *might* wanna read them if I were a fan of Iroha-chan."

"Yeah. Anyway, that was how I forced Iroha away from her mom's coddling and down the path of darkness. I took away her right to be a good girl in her mom's eyes."

"It was all for the best, though, right? I mean, I was floored when I found out what Otoha-san was really like, but you actually gave Iroha-chan *more* freedom, not less."

"Think of it like this: I made Iroha run the risk of ruining her relationship with her mom. She won't know if that was the right thing for her until the very end of her life. So, the least I can do for her is keep her secret safe. I told *you*, Mashiro, because I trust you."

"R-Right. I promise I won't tell anyone. Iroha-chan may be my rival, but she's also my friend."

"Thanks, Mashiro. I think it's about time we got off, don't you?"

"Yeah... I didn't even notice how dark it's gotten. I think the parade'll start soon."

“I don’t usually talk for that long... Crap, now that I’m thinking about it, I’m getting embarrassed. Like I just told you all my cringiest secrets!”

“You’re really just realizing that now, huh?”

Epilogue: Goodbye, Senpai

I ran and ran and ran. I didn't have anywhere to go. I just wanted to get away. So I ran.

But what was new? Running was all Kohinata Iroha (that's me) ever did.

When the park's giant castle came into view, I shifted my feet forty-five degrees and changed course. I was now headed for the back of the run-down shack-type building to one side. It was getting late, and I had a hunch the castle was about to be illuminated by those fancy lights.

I didn't deserve to shine in the light. My place was here, in these gloomy shadows. I slid down against the wall behind a huge garbage can, sitting down on the ground with my knees to my chest. Then I sighed, trying to give all this pent-up emotion inside me an outlet.

"I've really done it this time..."

I was complete and utter trash.

After all this time I spent developing myself with Senpai, and after all the confidence I gained when Mizuki-san instantly fell for my talents... The moment mom showed up, it was like I was back at the starting line. I was like a pile of building blocks that would collapse if you just took out the center piece. Like I was constantly walking a tightrope.

"What the heck have I been doing all this time?" Another sigh.

I'd tried so hard to change. Observing anyone I could to gain the ability to become them. Training in the art of drama. All so that I wouldn't disappoint Senpai, who'd recognized my talents. I'd studied my butt off to get into the same prestigious school as Senpai, after he worked to join Ozuma there. I'd brainstormed with Senpai whenever the 05th Floor Alliance found itself in a bind, even when there were very few ideas I could offer.

I'd worked so, so hard. I thought I could face mom and tell her the truth.

But I couldn't.

The sadness in her eyes completely stopped me from admitting I wanted to go into acting. I had no idea why she looked so sad. But I was her daughter. I knew better than anyone she wasn't the kind of person to restrict my freedom out of pure spite. There was an actual reason, one she couldn't tell me. Sticking to my own selfish desires

despite knowing that made me feel like the scum of the earth.

“What do I do now?”

Mom already knew. She knew I’d been working towards becoming an actress. Running away solved nothing. She was my mom. If I went home, she’d be there. And even if she wasn’t, she had my contact details. I could never run away completely.

I had two choices. Back down or move forward.

If mom asked me straight, would I really be able to tell her outright that I wanted to act?

I didn’t think so.

And if I couldn’t come clean, then what? Would I have to give up? On Senpai, the Alliance, Otoi-san, Tachibana-san and the other musicians, and all the time we spent together working on our game?

The thought I’d never get to work with any of them ever again tore a hole in my heart that chilled my entire body. I’d experienced this sense of loss before. Back in junior high, when the cherry blossoms were falling, and there was an air of relaxation all around us.

That was the day Senpai graduated.

“Congratulations, Ooboshi-senpai!”

“Thanks, Iroha.”

The graduation ceremony was over, and Ooboshi-senpai and I were standing under a big cherry blossom tree far away from the hustle and bustle at the school building. He was holding a round tube with his certificate inside.

By the way, our school didn’t hold to the myth that confessing under a cherry tree would cement the couple’s eternal love—unfortunately.

Ooboshi-senpai placed a hand on the tree, and blinked, seeming in thought. “Why’d you call me all the way out here, though? We’re neighbors.”

“This is the last time we’ll be able to see each other at school.”

“We never really saw each other at school in the first place.”

“There’s a *huge* gap between not seeing each other, and not being *able* to see each other.”

“Really?”

“Really really.”

Not really. It was a stupid argument. I’d called him out here for something else.

When we were at his place, it was obvious that Ooboshi-senpai saw me exclusively as the actress he was directing. It was clear in the way he treated and spoke to me, and the way he always kept a certain

distance between us. And there were way more examples that were even more trivial than those.

I was only a kouhai to him there. School was the one place he might actually see me as a *girl*.

I was going to confess.

That was why I'd called him here.

Honestly, I'd been panicking.

A week ago, Tachibana-san sent me this LIME message:

"Those big shot producers I sent demos to? It's going super well! And you'll never guess what! They're gonna train me up properly so I can eventually get a contract with a major label!"

She went on to say she was going to be busy, so we wouldn't be able to meet as much, and that she was going to quit school when she graduated junior high to focus on her music, but that she'd still help out with our game.

Tachibana-san was one of the few people I considered a friend, and now it felt like she was leaving me behind. Then there was Ooboshi-senpai, who was graduating today and disappearing off to high school.

There was a one-year gap between this kouhai and her senpai that would never close. No matter how much I wanted to influence it, time would continue ticking at the same pace for both of us—but I couldn't help wishing for some kinda magic that could change all that.

He said we were neighbors, but we only ever met in the apartments for game-related work. The promise he made to direct me, and mine to work hard in my acting, were purely verbal. There was no contract. There was no guarantee of anything. Our relationship was on shaky ground now—there was no telling how long it would last after Ooboshi-senpai left for high school and started living in a whole new environment.

So I wanted something to keep us connected. Something that wasn't just work.

"There's something I've wanted to tell you for a long time."

"Wh-Why do you look so serious?"

I was nervous. My face was *definitely* red.

Ooboshi-senpai was nervous. His face was red.

Say it! Say it! Tell him!

My heart was pounding and getting on my nerves. So what?

Summon them! The most explosive characters you've ever played! The one with the rumbling chainsaw! The one with the in-your-face nitro engine! Go get him!

Go! Go! Go! Go!

The inspiring chant went round and round and round and round in my head. But each extra shout of encouragement fried my brain

hotter and hotter. My eyes spun, my blood froze, my thoughts stopped, and my words dissipated.

“Uuummm... O-Oobo...shi...senpai! I have a request!” I quickly bowed my head. My pose couldn’t be mistaken for anything *other* than a love confession.

“S-Sure. What is it?”

I...

“Can I call you Senpai?”

...backed down.

I came out with something totally dumb instead.

“Hm? Sure, but...you already call me senpai.”

Yep. Nice comeback. Perfectly reasonable.

But I’d backed down already. I couldn’t use his response to segue back on track. So I made up some random crap on the spot, and said that instead.

“I don’t mean ‘Ooboshi-senpai.’ I mean Senpai.”

“What’s the difference?”

“It’s like saying...you’re my *only* senpai.”

“Okay?”



“I will have no other senpais but you. You won’t be the best or worst senpai; you will be the only senpai.”

“I have no idea what that means.”

Same, to be honest. But I felt like it meant we were a little closer, and I guess that was the main thing.

“You know what they say about corpses being buried under the cherry blossom trees, right?” I said.

“Yeah, but I don’t wanna be reminded of that when I’m actually standing right under one.”

“Buried under such beautiful flowering trees, I’m sure those people’s spirits become something magical.”

“Getting spiritual now? You’re not trying to recruit me for Irohaism now, are you?”

The heck was “Irohaism”? Though I knew I was just as guilty of speaking nonsense as he was.

“Promise me. In front of these spirits.”

“Promise you what?”

“That you’ll stick with me and be my producer till the very end.”

As long as he stayed my producer, we’d be connected—no matter how indecisive I was. Even if I couldn’t ever bridge that one-year gap between us.

“Oh, huh. That’s what you wanted.” Ooboshi-senpai—I mean, Senpai—chuckled lightly, as though it was strange of me to ask him something like that at this point.

I got indignant. Was he patronizing me or what?

But I didn’t sulk for long.

“You’ve got nothing to worry about. I’ve already decided to give away the best of my teenage years to this. I’m never going to let you down,” Senpai said firmly.

Yeah...

I was sure of it then.

I want to stick with him forever.

That day patched up the rift in my heart. It didn’t do a very good job, though; the lightest of scratches would have that rift opening up again. If my place in the Alliance got taken away, I’d be thrown out into an ocean of loneliness all over again. Trying to distract myself by putting on my solo shows might only make it worse this time around.

I said goodbye to Ooboshi-senpai on the day of his graduation. I didn’t want to say goodbye to “just” Senpai now.

“Tachibana-san’s music...”

I needed something to hold on to, so I took out my phone. Not the

one linked to my home address, but the secret one Senpai got for me. I launched the music streaming service and selected the album I was looking for: *My Friend's Little Sister Is an Autogyro Beauty*. It was Tachibana-san's first independent album that she'd made with her rock band, Downtown Asakusa Metal. The track I picked was very important to me; it was apparently inspired by my relationship with Senpai. I liked to play it in his room at full blast. I didn't have my headphones with me, so I had to listen to it on the quietest possible volume.

I stopped seeing so much of my friend once I started high school, and, at some point, we fell out of touch. Tachibana-san had been busy, and she stopped being able to come to recording sessions for *Koyagi*. We never managed to make our schedules line up so we could meet.

The closest I got to her now was hearing what she was up to from Otoi-san. If I gave up on being an actress, I'd probably lose my connection to her all together.

A void was opening up inside me.

"Sasara'd still be my friend... She'd probably be my *only* friend."

"Are you serious?! I'm worth a billion friends all by myself!"

I heard her retort in my head.

Sasara could be annoying sometimes, but right now I was more than grateful to have her.

"Hm?"

Just then, there was a commotion from the run-down hut behind me. Quietly poking my head out from behind the garbage can, I saw staff members rushing to and fro. From the scraps of conversation I heard, they were getting ready for the night parade.

What if I'd ended up somewhere with restricted access? I hadn't looked where I was going when I ran, so it was definitely possible.

Whoa! I just saw that guy take off his costume!

The official line of the costume industry was that there were no humans inside them—and I'd just seen one. Didn't that make me public enemy number one?!

I can't stay here! I'll be annihilated!

My panic faded almost as quickly as it had come. I let out a wistful sigh. All these people looked like they were having so much *fun* preparing for the parade. They were about to transform themselves into someone else completely and dance in a world of magical whimsy. I wish I could wear the same smile as them and be part of a colorful world like theirs.

I wanted to be there with my friends and my Alliancesmates. But, most of all...

I wanted to be there with Senpai.

Epilogue 2: What Midori Saw

In fall, the evening sun never loitered. That poetic thought wove itself together automatically in my brain, as sudden as the sunset that inspired it. Very quickly, the excitement that surrounded us in Tenchido Eternaland was starting to die down.

I, Kageishi Midori, knew this was just the calm before the storm. In ten more minutes, the nightly parade would commence. A magic spell would be cast on young and old alike, and they would frolic with the mascots of the video game world.

While the theme park patrons focused their attention on the main road that stretched towards the large, decorative castle, me and my classmate companions were looking straight up at the sky. Or rather, the object that hung in it: a certain gondola of the Ferris wheel.

“Ooboshi-kun and Tsukinomori-san have been on that ride for more than two hours.”

By pure coincidence, I had spotted them getting on the ride together, and was swept away by the urge to keep watch on them from the shadows. But, no matter how many turns the Ferris wheel made, they showed no signs of alighting from the car.

Around and around it went, a rotating locked room with exactly one boy and exactly one girl inside it.

“They *have* to be doing something indecent.”

It was my solemn duty not to take my eyes off this ride until they emerged, yet I was terrified of the mental destruction that would result from my seeing them together, their faces flushed. While fluctuating between those two states, my neurons were firing with explosive speed, their processes facilitated by all three hundred of my IQ points, leading my brain to a single conclusion:

“Ooboshi-kun...is a womanizer!”

I fled.

Ten seconds after Midori's desertion, Ooboshi Akiteru stepped off from the gondola and paused as he caught sight of a familiar, retreating ponytail. Tsukinomori Mashiro shot him a quizzical glance from beside him.

“What's wrong, Aki?”

“I could've sworn I just saw Midori-san. Guess it was my

imagination.”

Midori was already too far away to have heard them in any case. Her false impression had only been amplified by the high-speed processes her three-hundred-IQ brain was capable of. She had been magnificently *wrong*, and now she was only running further and further away from the truth.

Epilogue 3: Meeting with the CEO

When we got off the Ferris wheel, I thought I heard a familiar voice. I looked in its direction, but all I saw was a ponytail disappearing into the crowd. Surprised, I stopped in my tracks, and Mashiro shot me a quizzical glance.

“What’s wrong, Aki?”

“I could’ve sworn I just saw Midori-san. Guess it was my imagination.”

“You spent ages in that Ferris wheel with me, then the moment you get off you start thinking about other girls? Disgusting.”

“Hey, it’s not like that! Don’t get tetchy.”

“Hmph!” Mashiro pointedly averted her gaze.

With her arms folded like that, she was truly a model tsundere. I was trying to come up with a way to cheer her up when she murmured, “From what you told me in there, it sounds like Iroha-chan’s personality’s been influenced by her old friend. Does that mean when she’s all annoying, it’s not her true self either?”

“I think it is, actually. I’ll give you that Iroha’s acting range is huge, but I’m pretty sure something needs to exist inside her in the first place before she can bring it to the surface. The way she feels completely at home at my place can’t be an act. Tachibana wouldn’t behave like that either.”

“That’s true...”

“Though I’m sure she must have had *some* influence. Iroha probably had to grapple with the same question too.”

When she only had me to be annoying towards (though now she also had Mashiro and Tomosaka Sasara), the opportunities for others to see who she really was were limited. How was your true self defined? That wasn’t something you could answer by yourself; it was more an implicit sense that you developed through interacting with several outside parties.

If nothing changed, Iroha’s incredible acting abilities would make it hard for other people to identify who she really was, and she herself might struggle to define the boundaries inside her.

If acting was all about rediscovering yourself through adopting a role, then it was important to come from a place where you weren’t liable to lose sight of yourself. I had a hunch that might become a problem when Iroha would start aiming for even greater heights.

“Excuse me, LVIPs! Please wait a moment!” A female staff member from the Ferris wheel was hurrying towards us.

“What can we do for you?” I asked.

“I have a message from our CEO, Amachi. She would like to see you in her office, which is in the managerial building, as soon as possible. She has asked to see you alone, Ooboshi-sama.”

“Um, well, it’s a little late. I was hoping to get back to the hotel.”

“It’s a matter of urgency.”

I paused. “Are we in trouble because we spent so long on the Ferris wheel? I guess it *was* a little over-the-top, even if we are LVIPs...”

“Oh, that wasn’t a problem. You could have even stayed on for much longer, if you wanted to.”

We could’ve, huh?

But if that wasn’t the issue, what was?

“I’m afraid I wasn’t told many of the details myself, but apparently you would understand if I gave you the name, ‘Iroha.’”

I stared at her.

Oh yeah. I understood, all right.

I did not have a good feeling about this *at all*.

Otoha-san wanted to see me about Iroha. And it was serious enough that she called it “urgent.” I wasn’t dense enough to miss what that meant. Not when it came to work, at least.

“Aki...” Mashiro tugged on my sleeve, anxious.

“Don’t worry, Mashiro.” I put a hand on her shoulder and smiled in an effort to reassure her.

When we first got to Eternaland, I was frightened of invoking Otoha-san’s wrath. I’d panicked, feeling totally unprepared. But now, I’d spent a long time in that Ferris wheel looking back over the past. I’d faced the memories I’d been hoping to forget—and now I felt just a little better.

“I’m gonna settle this once and for all.”

Amachi Otoha. Otherwise known as Kohinata Otoha. The final boss waiting in the last dungeon. She held the chains that robbed Iroha of her freedom. I was Iroha’s producer, and it was time to gather my resolve and strike.

When I opened the magnificent double doors garnished with tons of decorations, I found myself in a luxurious room. Again I had the sense I was meeting with the grand last boss of an RPG. A bright red Persian carpet covered the floor. A chandelier hung from the ceiling. Ridiculously big vases were dotted around. There was a worn bookshelf that looked like it should contain spell books from eras past,

and treasure chests which I already knew were empty. The photos of former Tenchido CEOs lined the walls in the same way you might find pictures of Beethoven and Bach in a music room.

The whole place looked expensive, but it was also clear that a lot of work had gone into this office to keep it in line with the fictional setting of the rest of the park. Tenchido had pride in what it did.

At the back of the room was the throne... Okay, not a throne, but one of those chairs that you can tell from a single glance was made for important people only.

And she was sitting there: Amachi Otoha.

“I’m so glad you came and didn’t try to run away. You’re such a good little boy!”

“What’s with the cutesy tone? I swear it only comes out sometimes.”

“Oh, oopsie! It happens, sometimes, when I’m wary of who I’m talking to,” Otoha-san said, putting one hand over her mouth, and using the other to offer me a seat on the couch.

I took a seat, just as wary as she was.

Thinking back, I could remember all the “tee hee”s and “sweetie”s she dropped when Tsukinomori-san invited me to have dinner with them. That was the time we’d first met.

Since then, I felt like she’d used it much less frequently. I’d thought she’d been speaking like that because she was with Tsukinomori-san, and the two of them were close. *But*, if the cutesy act only came out when she was dealing with serious business, or she didn’t totally trust the person she was talking to...

That meant she was wary of *me* right now. Which only made sense. I was the dirtbag leading her precious daughter down the wrong path. From her perspective, at least.

“I know you’re clever. You already know why I’ve called you here, don’t you?” she asked.

“Kind of... It’s about Iroha, right?”

“You’ve been doing all sorts of things to try and make an actress out of her. It’s highly troublesome of you.”

“I’m...not going to apologize for that, because I’m not doing anything wrong.”

“Let me cut right to the chase before we have this argument, okay, sweetie?” Otoha-san paused. “I will allow Iroha to continue her acting.”

I gawked at her. “Huh?”

What did she just say? She was going to let Iroha act?

Her words were so out of the blue that everything I’d prepared to say before I got here totally vanished from my mind. I’d wanted to tell her how Iroha used to put on these lifeless plays all by herself. How

happy she looked, getting to do what she loved. How we had all become stronger, better humans through creating something *together*. How talented her daughter was.

Before I'd stepped into this final dungeon, I'd practiced my presentation over and over again in my head. To give myself the best chance of convincing Otoha-san that Iroha's acting was a good thing. And now Iroha had full permission to continue, and I didn't even lift a finger...

I mean, I should have been happy. I loved efficiency, right? This was probably the most efficient outcome I could've hoped for.

The smackdown came very suddenly; the removal of the ladder I was climbing. It was powerful enough to be called a punch line, even though it wasn't funny. It was like a strike to the chin that left me with concussion, and knocked the words right out of my mouth.

All I could do was watch Otoha-san's scarlet lips move as she spoke. "*But...*"

I was already staggering, but she was about to deliver the final, heavy blow—right into the center of my stomach.

"...you, Ooboshi Akiteru-kun, must step down as producer."

Afterword

Hello, this is author mikawaghost. Thank you for purchasing the newest release in the *My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Me!* series, volume 10! I apologize for the long wait between this volume and the last one. The school trip from last time transformed seamlessly—and, maybe even strangely—into a story about Akiteru's past. Did you enjoy it? Looking back meant we also got to see more of his friendship with Ozu, and the beginnings of his relationship with Otoi-san, so I was eager to get the story to you as soon as possible. And we got to learn Otoi-san's first name, which she's been keeping close to her chest since the moment she showed up. I wonder if any of you had already guessed it? If so, congrats. I hereby give you permission to go to the toilet.

I love Otoi-san way too much, so she gets a ton of screen time here. My editor told me my favoritism was way too obvious, so I threw a tantrum to get my way, saying "Shut it! What's wrong with shining a spotlight on her for a little bit?!" It's a fair enough question, right? I have to say, I'm highly satisfied with the outcome.

Time for the acknowledgments.

To my illustrator, tomari-sensei. Thank you, as always, for your amazing artwork! I loved seeing Iroha as her moodier, younger self; she's incredibly charming in a whole different way to what we've seen before. The new character, Tachibana, too—seeing those pictures of her made me want to shout her name out loud. They were total works of art! (I mean, obviously they're works of art, but I think you get what I'm trying to say...) Otoi-san looked super fantastic as her delinquent self too! I'll be working hard to make those girls shine even brighter in my stories, so I hope you'll stick with me for the illustrations.

To Hiraoka Hira-sensei, who's in charge of *ImoUza's* manga version. It's now getting into the Kageishi Village arc, and the characters look more alive with each volume. I've always got this huge grin on my face as I'm reading. Thank you for your wonderful addition to the *ImoUza* world!

To my editor, Nuru-san, I'm sorry for trampling all over my deadlines. I know a one-month extension is a huge ask, and I've learned my lesson. I'll do my best so that next time, I only need to ask for an extra week. But none of that will stop me from enjoying the

working relationship we have, and I hope the same is true for you.

To the editorial staff and everyone else at GA Bunko. I'm incredibly grateful for the way you pull out all the stops when it comes to the release. I'm looking forward to working with you for future volumes.

And, most importantly, thank you to my readers. I'm sure you know this already, having read ten whole volumes, but things are only going to get more turbulent from here on out. I hope you'll continue to look forward to seeing what's in store for Akiteru, Iroha, and everyone else!

That's all from me,
mikawaghost

My Friend's
Little Sister
Has It **IN** for Me!

vol.
10

Author:
mikawaghost
Illustration:
tomari



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Kohinata Iroha

Junior High First Year.
Ozuma's Little Sister.

“Oh, um—
I’m his sister,
Kohinata Iroha.
Thanks for...being
his friend.”



“Certainly.”

“Ooboshi.
Kohinata. I wanna
see you two behind
the gymnasium.”

O:toi ★★★★★

Junior High Second Year.
Leader of Krimzon.

Tachibana Asagi

Iroha's classmate.
Cheeky and annoying.

“Hey, that’s my
school’s garb. You
skippin’, bro?”

“C’mon. Gimme
some change. You
listened to my
song, right?”



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mikawaghost

Illustration:
tomari



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NIDAKE UZAI Vol. 10

by mikawaghost

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Edited by Hendra Boerma

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